VERSIONS OF THE GOTHIC
IN
MARGARET ATWOOD'S FICTION

by

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text or in the footnotes.

Gail Fraser

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses chronologically, the adaptation and transformation of the Gothic in four of Margaret Atwood's novels, namely *Surfacing, Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale.* Atwood's versions of the gothic run the gamut from serious to comical but even while parodying the conventions of the gothic, and exposing the 'perils of gothic thinking', Atwood never loses sight of the underlying seriousness of the subject.

While there are elements of the female gothic experience throughout the four novels, each presents a specific gothic focus. Atwood concentrates on the psychological victimisation of the individual in *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle,* but on the more literal victimisation by society in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale.* The heroines who are psychologically imprisoned within a negative self image in the first two novels are literally imprisoned in the later novels. And whereas the heroines of *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle* transform the ordinary world into a gothic one through the power of the imagination, the heroines of *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are subjected to the much more horrifying reality of political oppression.

Atwood's exploration of the complex issue of victimisation illustrates a basic ambivalence towards the gothic, for while it might be one of the best ways of embodying female fears, it is ultimately a destructive model. Essential to Atwood's discussion is the question of complicity. In varying degrees, Atwood's heroines are responsible for their predicaments.

There are echoes of Atwood's ideas about Canadian identity in her heroines — an identity shaped by the dominating landscape. The early heroine of *Surfacing,* cold, detached, motherless and searching, is transformed through the novels that follow into a stronger, more resilient and determined figure.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

it's only by our lack of ghosts
we're haunted.[1]

In an article entitled 'Canadian Monsters', Margaret Atwood comments that while most Canadian writing is planted firmly in the social-realistic realm, '[the] supposed lack of otherworldly dimensions, or even worldly ones, used to be almost routinely lamented by poets and other critics.'[2] Over the past few years a certain amount of ghostly digging has been going on and Atwood suggests that one of the motivations for this is a 'search for reassurance. We want to be sure that the ancestors, ghosts and skeletons really are there; that as a culture we are not as flat and lacking in resonance as we were once led to believe.'[3] But it is Atwood herself who is primarily responsible for uncovering the '"mass of dark intimations" in the Canadian literary soul.'

Atwood's interest in the non-rational, which suggests a predilection for the machinations of Gothic fiction, has not gone unnoticed by the critics. According to Judith McCombs there is an obvious gothic terror which haunts much of Atwood's lyric poetry, many of the interior monologues of her

[1] Earl Birney, 'CAN. LIT. (or *them able leave her ever*),' *Ghosts in the Wheels* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 49.

[2] Margaret Atwood, 'Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction,' in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), p. 230.

[3] Atwood, 'Canadian Monsters' in *Second Words*, p. 231.

fiction and in particular, Atwood's three poetry sequences, *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and *Power Politics* (1971).[4] In another article, 'Atwood's Poetic Politics,' Eli Mandel discusses the gothic possibilities of Atwood's work in terms of an apparent disparity between the social commentary on the one hand, and the oracular qualities on the other. Referring to 'Tricks with Mirrors' from *You Are Happy* (1974), he comments: 'It is the mirror poems that suggest, more pointedly than usual in her work, questions about duplicity and reflexiveness and techniques of demystification — concerns quite different from apparently clear and accessible social comment.'[5] In the same article Mandel describes how Atwood uses gothic romance 'to reveal those invisible aspects of contemporary culture which have been derealised or demystified.'[6] Margot Northey uses the term 'sociological gothic' to describe the paradoxical blend of social realism and gothic fantasy found in *Surfacing*.[7]

In this study, I will focus on four novels which illustrate Atwood's fascination with gothicisms, ghosts, and monsters: *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1981), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The 'paradoxical blend of social realism and gothic fantasy' that Northey mentions in *Surfacing* is evident in the other three novels. However, while each novel presents a version of Atwood's gothic sensibility, there is a movement

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[4] Judith McCombs, 'Atwood's Haunted Sequence: *The Circle Game, The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* and *Power Politics,*' in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism,* ed. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: Anansi, 1981), p. 36.

[5] Eli Mandel, 'Atwood's Poetic Politics,' in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), p. 54.

[6] Mandel, p. 63.

[7] Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 62.

towards the concretisation of the Gothic whereby the fears and anxieties surrounding the female experience are reified or made literal. The trend towards the literal suggests that the ghosts which haunt her fictional landscape are not the manifestations of the supernatural but commonplace realities of an increasingly hostile world. In a sense, Atwood employs the Gothic as a means to an end, as a means by which contemporary Canadian cultural identities and female cultural identities in particular, can be investigated. So while the novels demonstrate Atwood's critical examination of her own literary tradition and the pattern of victimisation, they also reveal her adaptation and transformation of the much older tradition of Gothic romance.

The term 'Gothic' is most usually applied to a group of novels written between roughly 1760 and 1820, some of which have had a persistent influence on later writers, particularly the works of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, C.R. Maturin and Mary Shelley. Certain conventions common to novels by these authors became associated with the Gothic: the haunted castle, the persecuted and overimaginative heroine, the tyrannical villain, the presence of supernatural agents, an emphasis on the terrifying, and a simplistic opposition between good and evil.[8] An early critic, Edith Birkhead, remarked that 'Gothic Romance did not reflect real life, or reveal character, or display humour. Its aim was different. It was full of sentimentality, and it stirred the emotions of pity and fear. . . . Hair-breadth

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[8] Useful general accounts of the term 'Gothic' appear in Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (New York: Dutton, 1921); Coral Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (London: Athlone, 1978); David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980); and Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame: Being a History of the GOTHIC NOVEL in England: Its Origins, Efflorescence, Disintegration and Residuary Influences,* (1957), rpt. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966).

escapes and wicked intrigues in castles built over beetling precipices were sufficiently outside the reader's own experience to produce a thrill.'[9] Gothic fiction was full of vague, unexplained horrors, designed not to render a precise meaning but to evoke terror. For this reason it was considered a 'popular' form of entertainment and ridiculed by some for its excesses. Everything in the gothic world was exaggerated, especially the heroine who suffered incessantly from persecution, hysteria and madness. Terms such as extravagant, melodramatic, artificial, sensational, and theatrical were common epithets used to describe gothic fiction.

At the same time, however, the use of these extravagant conventions distanced the world of gothic fiction from the world of everyday experiences and made it possible to explore fears and anxieties and 'taboo' subjects such as incest, which lurk in the eighteenth century novel. But as the form developed, there were instances of attempts to enlarge, revise or reshape its conventions in the direction of seriousness.

Edith Birkhead refers to *Villette, Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as examples of a change in fashion and says of their authors: 'The Brontës do not trifle with emotion or use supernatural elements to increase the tension. Theirs are the terrors of actual life.'[10] Robert B. Heilman takes up this idea when he discusses Charlotte Brontë: '[The 'new Gothic'] released her from the patterns of the novel of society and therefore permitted the flowering of her real talent — the talent for finding and giving dramatic form to impulses and feelings which, because of their depth or mysteriousness or intensity or ambiguity, or of their ignoring or transcending everyday norms of propriety or reason, increase wonderfully the sense of reality in the novel.'[11] Coral

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[9] Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror*, p. 223.

[10] Birkhead, p. 225.

Ann Howells also discusses Charlotte Brontë's deliberate reshaping of gothic convention whereby nightmare is fused with tangible fact to create an emotional reality of agony and concludes: 'With *Jane Eyre* Gothic fiction is normalised into the mainstream of literature, and fantasy and realism fused in a statement about awareness of the irrational in man.'[12]

Although the Gothic is a well recognised genre, its constitution continues to be somewhat problematic. While some critics have deplored the use of the term to describe any but a limited range of novels that employ a specific set of conventions, others have stretched the definition to include authors who are obviously not part of the Gothic tradition. The very conventionality of the Gothic, (and the fact that it can be reduced to a formula) seems to contradict the range of fictional possibilites within the form. The variation in opinion as to what constitutes the Gothic is exemplified by the following critics. Elizabeth R. Napier's aim in *The Failure of Gothic* is to 'isolate the distinctive stylistic techniques of the Gothic', and to 'delimit the genre with greater strictness' and in so doing she questions the propriety of employing the term 'Gothic' to describe the use of Gothic elements in later nineteenth-and twentieth-century fiction.[13] In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'thematic' and 'assimilative' approach to the Gothic enables her to suggest that she would like 'to make it easier for the reader of "respectable" nineteenth-century novels to write "Gothic" in the margin . . . and to make that notation with a sense of linking

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[11] Robert B. Heilman, 'Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic,' in *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad*, ed. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), pp. 131-32.

[12] Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery*, p. 187.

[13] Elizabeth R. Napier, *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-century Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. xiii.

specific elements in the passage with specific elements in the constellation of Gothic conventions'.[14] George E. Haggerty's view is that 'Gothic fiction cannot have specific meaning [since] indeterminacy is inherent to its nature'.[15] In Atwood's use of the thematic conventions of the Gothic, there is both variety and consistency. It is not my intention in this study to suggest that Margaret Atwood writes definitively within the gothic form but rather to suggest that gothic strategies are a significant part of her fiction — that we can, following Sedgwick's suggestion, usefully locate specific elements in the 'constellation of Gothic conventions'. Like the Brontës before her, Atwood creates new possibilities for meaning by consistently transforming the gothic form.

In recent years, feminist perceptions have focussed on the ways in which femaleness shapes the Gothic. Elaine Showalter comments on a 'feminist rehabilitation of the female gothic, a mutation of a popular genre once believed marginal but now seen as part of the great tradition of the novel.'[16] In her pioneering essay on the 'Female Gothic' Ellen Moers presents the Gothic as writing that 'has to do with fear', writing in which

> fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror (as we say tragedy does), but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.[17]

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[14] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 4.

[15] George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), p. 8.

[16] Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,' *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1985), p. 265.

[17] Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic' in *Literary Women*, reprinted with a new introduction by Helen Taylor, 1986 (London: The Women's Press, 1963), p. 90.

For Moers, physiological fear or dread seems to be the most important characteristic of the female gothic. In her discussion of *Frankenstein,* she suggests that Mary Shelley 'brought birth to fiction not as realism but as Gothic fantasy, and thus contributed to Romanticism a myth of genuine originality: the mad scientist who locks himself in the laboratory and secretly, guiltily works at creating human life, only to find that he has made a monster.' Instead of rejoicing, Frankenstein recoils with horror and dread at what he has done and the monster he has created, in turn, haunts and destroys the creator. Moers says of the novel: '[It] is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread and flight surrounding birth and its consequences.' Moers claims that '*Frankenstein* seems to be distinctly a *woman's* mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, nor upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth' and goes on to conclude that women writers used gothic mechanisms to express feelings and beliefs and even facts about their existence that they could communicate in no other way.[18] For this reason, she maintains, the gothic paradigm has been and continues to be an important vehicle for women writers.[19]

In Atwood's version of the female Gothic, a connection is made between the female experience and the perception of an isolated, menacing landscape. The vast, empty Canadian landmass, which is cold, bleak and forbidding, conjures up the perfect gothic setting. Northrop Frye, for example, remarks that '[he has] long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a

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[18] Moers, p. 93.

[19] Barbara Johnson discusses the importance of the maternal or monstrous plot in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 'My Monster/My Self,' *Diacritics,* 12, no. 2, pp. 2-10.

tone of deep terror in regard to nature, . . . [which] is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest'.[20] In Frye's view, the confrontation with 'a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting' led to the development of the 'garrison mentality' in Canadian literature.[21] Margaret Atwood uses the term 'paranoid schizophrenia' to characterise the dichotomous love/hate relationship with the menacing landscape, perceiving that Canadians 'are immigrants to this place even if [they] were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to [them, they] move in fear, exiles and invaders.'[22]

While Atwood's interest in the grotesque and the monstrous emerges in her study of Rider Haggard's mysteries in 'Superwoman Drawn and Quartered' and in the previously mentioned essay on 'Canadian Monsters', with its discussion of the supernatural and pseudo-supernatural as elements in Canadian fiction,[23] it is most evident in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*,[24] her most extensive and important critical work. Here, she clearly identifies the victim role and outlines how Canadian cultural identities have been repressed over the years. Atwood argues that Canadian literature is haunted by 'Nature as Monster' because one is easily made a

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[20] Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 225.

[21] Frye, p. 225.

[22] Margaret Atwood, 'Afterword,' *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 62.

[23] 'Superwoman Drawn and Quartered: The Early Forms of *She*,' pp. 35-54, and 'Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction', pp. 229-53 in *Second Words*.

[24] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 203. Future references will be included in the text.

victim in this sort of harsh environment, an argument which is reinforced in her own fiction. *Surfacing,* for example, involves a heroine's journey into the backwoods of Canada where she is pursued by all sorts of gothic horrors. Helpless and alone, she is forced to confront the wilderness and her own fragmentation. Even in *Lady Oracle,* the ravines of suburban Toronto constitute a threatening landscape populated with 'villainous rescuers'. Atwood argues that when there is a close identification of man with nature, a process of victimisation occurs as nature begins to lose the battle. And under the heading 'Death by Nature', Atwood discusses the most common ways of dispatching the victims — drowning, freezing or madness. The nightmarish experience of being invaded by the wilderness is also commented upon.

Since nature is most often thought of as female, so 'Nature as Monster' is closely connected to the image of woman. In Canadian literature the image of woman seems to be double: that of a victim and monstrous old hag. In *Survival,* Atwood's discussion of the Triple Goddess conjures up all sorts of gothic possibilities and she suggests that the images of women mirror the Canadian landscape so that in a land of ice and snow we get 'destructive barren ice-goddesses' and 'nasty chilly old women'. She also informs us that the ghost or death goddess of Sheila Watson's *Double Hook* represents fear not of death but of life. Later, when the old lady's house burns down, Atwood tells us that 'her past and the past she has imposed on others — has been destroyed, her ghost is released from its obsessive search and she is converted from a death-goddess to something like the first stage in a new cycle, a rebirth' (p. 203). Atwood also argues that within the Canadian literary tradition, the 'Great Canadian Baby' too frequently becomes 'the Great Canadian Coffin . . . . But stunted or doomed fertility, the identity of birth and death, are what might be expected from the Ice Goddess' (p. 208).

And lastly, Atwood suggests that the traditional heroines of Canadian fiction are Rapunzel-like characters who 'have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons' (p. 209).

In terms of 'botched births' and 'defective femininity', Atwood's approach to the image of women in Canadian literature echoes Moers' comments on the female Gothic. The fragmentation that is typical of the female gothic heroine is closely allied to the idea of woman as both creator and destroyer. The polarities are perhaps much more noticeable when the woman is identified with the extreme landscape, with Nature as cold, frightening, empty, vast — a landscape capable of being transformed into a gothic prison every bit as sinister as the haunted castle or ruin.

George Woodcock maintains that *Survival* is important because 'it gives another form to themes and insights that can be found in [Atwood's] poetry and her fiction'.[25] The gothic quality of her book on Canadian fiction suggests that she was seeing Canadian literature through gothic eyes and the fundamental ideas of the Gothic that Atwood works through in her fiction are crystallised in this early work. In *Survival,* Atwood's emphasis on the deep ambiguity between woman as victim and woman as monster in nature would suggest that the critical work should be taken seriously. So while Atwood's critical opinions may be somewhat cliched ideas about Canadian mythology, they are ideas that are significant for their working out in her fiction.

In the concluding chapter of *Survival,* Atwood's suggestions once again point to certain tendencies in her own work. Although the tradition of Canadian literature might be a rather negative one, Atwood suggests that 'what can result is a "jail-break," an escape from our old habits of looking at

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[25] George Woodcock, 'Bashful but Bold: Notes on Margaret Atwood as Critic,' in *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, p. 239.

things, and a "re-creation," a new way of seeing, experiencing and imaging —or imagining— which we ourselves have helped to shape' (p. 246).

In *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form,* George E. Haggerty claims that every writer of Gothic fiction is confronted by the same literary dilemma: 'What manner of prose narrative most effectively embodies a nightmare vision?' He continues:

> The devices typical of Gothic fiction have not been chosen by accident. They offer the most complex vocabulary for Gothic expression because they have the power to objectify subjective states of feeling: In the novels they were developed as metaphorical vehicles, but their tenors remain inexpressible. They can only be expressed, that is, by each reader in his or her private terms. . . . It almost goes without saying that these works are primarily structured so as to elicit particular responses in the reader.[26]

Haggerty's comment seems to support my contention that gothic literature uses certain conventions to drag the reader into another world where horror and terror are not just described but vicariously experienced. No other form of fiction relies so emphatically on reader response for effect. In Gothic fiction it would seem that the reader becomes a creative participant in the text. Possibly this explains why Atwood, who has designs on the reader, returns to the Gothic so frequently. In the following comment Atwood discusses the importance of the reader's response:

> Reading is also a process [which] changes you. . . . When you read a book, it matters how old you are and when you read it and whether you are male or female, or from Canada or India. There is no such thing as a truly universal literature, partly because there are no truly universal readers. It is my contention that the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist.[27]

Although Gothic literature depends, for its success, on an emotional

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[26] Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form,* p. 3.

[27] Atwood, p. 345.

response, Atwood ironically reconstructs the gothic sensibility in an attempt to arouse the reader's imaginative sympathies and in so doing, makes an appeal towards the intellect as well as the emotions. And it is in Atwood's ironic reconstruction that we can see the ways in which the Gothic operates as a parody of other fictional narratives and conceptions of the world.[28] Atwood's recognition that the texts are created by their readers as much as by their writers opens up the possibility of an endless process of revisionary readings.

While traces of the original gothic and specifically female gothic conventions are apparent in Atwood's fiction, many of them have been revised. What is most evident is Atwood's reconstruction of the gothic heroine. Whereas the traditional gothic heroine is generally self-indulgent in her extravagant passion, Atwood's is by nature a cold, detached, lonesome, motherless, searching heroine. Atwood exposes the inherent duality whereby the heroines are tough yet vulnerable, childless yet have a creative imagination (hence the strong fantasy life), detached yet always in the middle of their own problem-filled and chaotic existence. Atwood's revision illustrates a basically ambivalent attitude towards the gothic, for while it might be one of the best ways of embodying female fears, it is also a destructive model as the ambiguity of woman and the Canadian landscape illustrates. Atwood examines the way in which conventional reality shapes the female identity to such an extent that the heroine is then trapped by her society's conception of the 'feminine'.

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[28] For a discussion on the ways in which the Gothic operates as a parody by creating a metaphysical world of uncertainty and anxiety see William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Chigaco Press, 1985), pp. 59-62.

Although the image of 'woman as victim' is a common thread throughout Atwood's four novels, the issue is a complex one. Atwood's gothic revision reflects the changing emphasis of an emerging feminist movement which tends to present the female as the agent of her own destiny, including her ability to be evil. Because Atwood believes that 'fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community' and the means by which we 'examine our society,'[29] conventions of gothic romance can be used to explore the question of evil and the limits of moral responsibility in the modern world. In Atwood's terms, victimisation does not abrogate moral responsibility. Atwood's fiction examines the perceptions of helplessness and the damaging 'victim' fantasies inherent in the gothic sensibility. She manipulates her heroines so that they can move from the position of victim to non-victim by acknowledging their complicity in the structures of exploitation and oppression.

Finally, the ambiguous nature of gothic fiction best expresses the contradiction at the centre of any search for female identity in Canadian literature. Atwood articulates a female voice that politically and culturally embodies this ambiguity. Although Atwood constructs a more resilient gothic heroine, there is no final rescue. Her heroines embark on a quest for self-discovery only to find that identity is a very illusive quality. As Mandel says of *Surfacing*, 'At the end, nothing is resolved.'[30]

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[29] Atwood, 'An End to Audience?,' in *Second Words*, p. 346.

[30] Eli Mandel, 'Atwood Gothic,' *Malahat Review*, 41 (1977), p. 169.

Chapter 2

Surfacing

> This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been.[1]

In a conversation with Graeme Gibson, Margaret Atwood comments that *Surfacing* is a ghost story in the Henry James tradition 'in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off.'[2] In its ghostly elements and in many other respects, *Surfacing* reflects Atwood's interest in the conventions of gothic romance. As Eli Mandel has observed, the novel is about a maiden in flight, a maiden who is surrounded by 'a variety of dark threats, either psychological or hidden in the social structure.'[3] However, *Surfacing* is far from a conventional gothic tale. Rather, it inverts elements of the gothic and in doing so re-orders the gothic experience. Like the Brontës before her, Atwood creates new possibilities for meaning by altering the gothic form. This is most evident in her reconstruction of the gothic world where everything is seen and nothing is felt.

The storyline of *Surfacing* is simple enough. The narrator is a young

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto, 1972; rpt. London: Virago Press, 1979), p. 191. Future references to this edition will appear in the text.

[2] Graeme Gibson, 'Margaret Atwood,' *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 29.

[3] Mandel, 'Atwood's Poetic Politics,' p. 57.

woman in her late twenties who returns to her childhood summer home on a remote island because her father has mysteriously disappeared. Reluctantly she brings along three friends and they begin searching for the father. He may have just gone off into the woods, he may have gone mad or he may be dead. Among his papers, the daughter uncovers clues which lead to the discovery of his drowned body. Upset by the certainty of her loss, she refuses to leave with her friends at the end of the week. She spends a few more days alone on the island but when her partner returns and calls out to her, she knows she will leave the wilderness and return with him to the city.

Although the narrator finds out what has happened to her father, the novel is not a realistic account of a search for a missing person. In true gothic fashion, nothing is as it seems. The narrator, without consciously understanding the process, is trying to re-establish contact with her past and find a way of living in the present. This means she must come to terms with the destructive and life-denying consequences of a failed love affair and an abortion.

A sense of mystery is established early in the novel because, to the narrator, things do not appear as they should. There is a discrepancy between what she sees and what she wants to remember: 'Nothing is the same, I don't know the way anymore' (p. 12). Things look innocent but are not. Even the American military base is camouflaged as an innocuous-looking spruce-covered hill and only 'the thick power lines running into the forest,' (p. 9) give it away. The lake which ought to be seen through 'tears and a haze of vomit' now appears 'blue and cool as redemption' (p. 15). Even when they reach the cabin things are not quite right; 'it's the same, it hasn't changed, but the shapes are inaccurate as though everything has warped slightly' (p. 73).

A sense of foreboding is created by the narrator's distorted vision, but the disembodied voice of the narrator, more than anything else, provides the novel with its ghostly quality. The first person singular narrative means that everything is seen through the eyes of an unnamed narrator about whom we know very little. Because we never learn her name, or very much about her physical appearance, instead of being identified as a fully realised character, the narrator is perceived as a voice, coming, as it were, from a distance. Sherrill Grace remarks that 'Atwood's use of a first person unnamed speaker draws us into both the novel and the frightening visual world of her protagonist. In fact, it is the voice that creates the claustrophobic atmosphere of the book from which we eventually wish to escape ourselves.'[4]

Just as the voice contributes to the sense of an enclosed and mysterious world, so too does the isolated setting. The unnamed and remote island reflects the narrator's emotional and spiritual isolation, and thus functions as both a physical and a psychological enclosure. But there is another way in which the island mirrors the narrator. Its detachment from the mainland reflects the narrator's detachment from her surroundings. Her comment that 'My friends' pasts are vague to me and to each other also, any one of us could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn't notice' (p. 30), would suggest that she is cut off not only from the present, but, like her friends, from the past as well.

As the narrative continues, we move with the protagonist deeper into her consciousness and her past, leaving behind objective reality and the present. This shift in tense causes some problems. Sherrill Grace suggests that 'Possibly Atwood wishes to emphasize both the narrator's self-alienation

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[4] Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1980), p. 98.

and her important journey into her past with the past tense, and the sense of immediate felt experience with the present.'[5] But we are left wondering from what conceivable point in time the narration takes place, particularly when the narrator comments: 'From where I am now it seems as if I've always known, everything, time is compressed like the fist I close on my knee in the darkening bedroom, I hold inside it the clues and solutions and the power for what I must do now' (p. 76). The shift back into the present tense in the the third part is foreshadowed by the statement, 'I unclose my fist, releasing, it becomes a hand again, palm a network of trails, lifeline, past present and future, the break in it closing together as I purse my fingers' (p. 159). The disruption in narrative time disturbs the reader's assumptions of what is 'real' in the fictional world and emphasises instead, the enclosed and mysterious nature of the world we are entering. But in a sense, it prepares us for the many distortions and deceptions inflicted upon us by the narrator's subjective view.

In discussing the closed world as a gothic convention, Elizabeth MacAndrew suggests that '[such] complex structures show how these works are to be read. They are variations of a technique for establishing the sense of a fiction that cannot be taken at face value, so that the reader will indeed apprehend the closed world as the isolated world of the self.'[6] Although we participate in the narrator's experiences, we cannot trust her perceptions because we soon begin to suspect that much of what we have been told is untrue. David Punter refers to gothic fiction as 'paranoiac fiction' in which 'the reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the

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[5] Grace, p. 100.

[6] MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, p. 119.

reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story.'[7] The use of such a narrative structure traps the reader in the closed world of the narrator's self-deception so that the reader,too, becomes a casualty of the ambiguous narrative.

Atwood increases the sense of menacing uncertainty in another way. There is a gruesome yet uncanny truth in much of what the narrator says, particularly when she is commenting on the supposed birth of her child:

> They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. (p. 80)

We are aware only later that what she describes here is not the birth but the death of the child. The narrator's fantasy of the child's birth is more than just uncertainty or ambiguity; it is the narrator's reconstruction of events according to her distorted version of the truth — a version warped by guilt. But there is another aspect of truth in what she tells us. The pins which have been stuck into her so she won't hear anything are also to stop her from feeling anything. Only later do we learn that her anaesthetised emotions probably date from this incident. She has cauterised her emotions just as the foetus is curetted — a rather bizarre way of protecting what is left of herself. Although her body is conscious afterwards, her psyche is not.

The sense of mystery is further enhanced by the narrator's inability to articulate her fears. We do not know why she is so worried about returning nor why she has come back only when her father might be dead. She admits to having a happy childhood and yet talks about her parents as if they belonged to someone else. And her comment 'If he's safe I don't want to see

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[7] Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 404.

him' (p. 29) seems most peculiar. She has come a long way just to find out whether her father has reappeared or not. We are given a few details about her so-called marriage and divorce but the situation is not such that a complete break in family relations is necessary. The many distortions and unanswered questions hover in the narrative and increase the sense of ambiguity.

Because of the narrator's limited point of view and her unreliability, the world she has created, where nothing is as it seems, resembles a nightmare. In discussing the world of gothic nightmare, Juliann E. Fleenor suggests it is 'created by the individual in conflict with the values of her society and her prescribed role.'[8] There are numerous examples in the novel which suggest that the narrator suffers antagonisms of this sort. She does not want to tell her travel companions too much about her family because the popular conception is that everyone disowns their parents at some point in early adult life, but she has obviously not disowned hers as much as she professes. She is at the same time very critical of the modern values of disposability espoused by her companions. She disapproves of her friend Anna's superficiality and lack of intellect and positively despises everything for which Anna's husband David stands. She has rejected the role of wife and mother and, at the same time, Anna's role of plaything and sexual object. The fact that the narrator has not chosen either of these roles and even more, that she has consciously rejected them, shows that she is determined to be different. She criticises what her friends say and do in a matter-of-fact and detached manner, seemingly without the ability or initiative to offer an alternative. She does not like what is going on around her but seems powerless to prevent it. The fact that the heroine is in 'limbo'—neither one thing nor the other, that she is

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[8] Juliann E. Fleenor, 'Introduction: The Female Gothic' in *The Female Gothic* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), p. 10.

physically and psychologically 'no where'— is part of her detachment which is responsible for the real horror of her situation.

There is no sense of female community in the novel, and a great deal of the narrator's lack of self-esteem seems to involve her lack of good 'role models'. Although Anna isn't a 'nasty chilly old woman', she represents another version of sterile femininity. She has turned herself into 'a young chick', which is what she imagines David wants in a wife. Early one morning, the narrator catches Anna putting on her make-up and realises she has never seen Anna without it. Much to her surprise Anna's face 'shorn of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes . . . is curiously battered, a worn doll's' (p. 43). In other words, what passes for her 'natural' face is an artificial one. Anna claims that David does not like to see her without make-up and then contradicts herself by saying he does not know she wears it. The narrator marvels at the deception this must involve. She wants to believe in good marriages but soon realises that where Anna and David are concerned marriage is a battleground where nobody wins. According to Gloria Onley, Anna's compulsive need to conform to male expectations fills her with unconscious self-loathing, therefore she must condemn her friend for being different.[9] The last image of Anna is a summary of everything the narrator does not want for herself:

> Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she copulates under strobe lights with the man's torso while his brain

[9] Gloria Onley, 'Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle', *Canadian Literature*, No. 60 (1974), p. 28.

> watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment, that is all. She is not bored, she has no other interests. (p. 165)

We gather that the narrator does not approve of Anna's feminine wiles and we assume that in criticising her so called 'best woman friend' the narrator must be quite different. But when we examine their relationship, we realise that Anna's deficiencies are a reflection of the narrator's. There is something artificial about both of them. Personal conversations are turned into something mechanical, insincere and rehearsed. At one point Anna is describing married life and the narrator comments on the advice: 'She talked to me then, or not to me exactly but to an invisible microphone suspended above her head: people's voices go radio when they give advice' (p. 47). The same thing happens when the narrator tries to convince Joe that marriage would not work: 'It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding, everything in order, a spool' (p. 87). The mechanical doll image emphasises the fragmentation, dehumanisation and lack of identity suffered by the heroine. And much like a lifeless doll, she must be brought back to life. Although both women are imprisoned within a negative self image, Anna lacks even the insight to realise she is incomplete.

The pairing of characters in the novel allows the narrator some insight into her own personality. Just as Anna's image mirrors the narrator's fragmented self, so too does David's. He, for example, is like the narrator in his inability to love. He likes to make Anna cry 'because he can't do it himself' (p. 122). The narrator's intense dislike of David illustrates her own self-hatred because they are so similar. She sees too much of herself in him and realises there is 'something essential missing' in both of them. As she

gains insight into her own deficiencies, the 'power' enables her to see into him: 'he was an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, *affiches,* verbs and nouns glued on to him and shredding away, the original surface littered with fragments and tatters' (p. 152). What she sees David turning into might just be happening to her.

While we can understand why the narrator disapproves of Anna and David, it is more difficult to accept her callous disregard for her boyfriend, Joe. Dispassionately, she explains her decision to live with Joe:

> It wasn't even a real decision, it was more like buying a goldfish or a potted cactus plant, not because you want one in advance but because you happen to be in the store and you see them lined up on the counter. (p. 42)

Her lack of commitment borders on the sinister and serves to emphasise her emotional detachment.

There is also conflict in the narrator's choice of employment. At first she wanted to be a real artist but was informed by her pseudo-husband that 'there have never been any important women artists' (p. 52) and she accepts his advice and becomes an illustrator. Later she blames him for her wrong choice but does nothing to change it. She creates the sorts of illustrations her boss, Mr. Percival, wants rather than what she thinks would appeal to children. In so doing, she manages to lose herself in the fantasy world of her illustrations just as she is to become lost in the wilderness; but the drawings, like her life, are not the truth but an idealised image of what she thinks she can live with.

Many of the problems that manifest themselves in adult life begin in the narrator's childhood. Although she remembers childhood as a happy time, it was by no means idyllic since the father split the family 'between two anonymities, the city and the bush' (p. 59). Her detachment from society,

then, begins at an early age. Moreover, the family does not seem to belong in either place. They are not accepted by the country people and seem out of place in the city. She is bullied by the city children because she is 'socially retarded' and won't join in their games. Even the relationship with her brother is responsible for establishing a pattern she continues to repeat in adult life: 'after a while I no longer fought back because I never won. The only defense was flight, invisibility' (p. 135).

The narrator of *Surfacing,* then, is a modified version of the gothic heroine. According to Moers, the traditional gothic heroine was for most writers 'quintessentially a defenseless victim, a weakling, a whimpering, trembling, cowering little piece of propriety whose sufferings are the source of her erotic fascination.'[10] But this was not the case with all writers and in particular, it was not the case with women writers. Moers argues that '[for] Mrs. Radcliffe, the Gothic novel was a device to send maidens on distant and exciting journeys without offending the proprieties.'[11] But travelling around as they did required more courage and fortitude than the rather insipid image would suggest. Howells makes the comment that 'an interesting feature of Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels of the 1790s [is] that her heroines who believed themselves to be so vulnerable always turned out to be invulnerable. Looking so defenceless, they were actually very manipulative of male power fantasies in order to protect themselves, and despite their fears they remained untouched by the violence around them.'[12] This heroic image of women

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[10] Moers, 'Traveling Heroinism: Gothic For Heroines' in *Literary Women,* p. 137.

[11] Moers, p. 126.

[12] Coral Ann Howells, 'Margaret Atwood,' *Private and Fictional Words* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 58.

continues into nineteenth century gothic novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Atwood's narrator, like Radcliffe's heroine, is 'simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine.'[13] Whereas in traditional gothic romance the heroine is 'snatched away from security to be subjected to trials which threaten the disintegration of her very identity but which she manages quite remarkably to survive,'[14] Atwood's heroine leaves home of her own accord and is subjected to terrors which are hidden, silent and interior. While there are differences between Atwood's narrator and the Radcliffean heroine, we can see the same thread of gothic 'heroinism' running through both.

Atwood's heroine is depicted as independent and self-sufficient. Although orphaned, she is by no means helpless. In fact, she is just the opposite. There are numerous examples throughout the narrative which suggest that she is responsible for the others, and in fact they expect her to take the initiative, particularly after they arrive at the cabin, 'her own territory'. The others stand around 'aimlessly' waiting for her to tell them what to do next. Everything is left up to her: she organises the food, lights the stove, plans the activities and there is one delightful scene where she does the motherly thing and coats their wrists with 'bug spray' before they set out. Not only must she fulfill the mother's role, but she must take on the father's role as well. It is she who must thread the squirming frog onto David's fishing line while Anna makes the more conventional female response 'God you're cold blooded' (p. 64). And when David finally catches the fish, she has to step in and whack it quickly with the knife handle, something she does not like doing. Later, she has the courage and determination to remain on the island by herself and confront the wilderness and her hidden fears.

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[13] Moers, 'Female Gothic', in *Literary Women*, p. 91.

[14] Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery*, p. 30.

But in *Surfacing,* there is another modification of the Gothic. Whereas the traditional gothic heroine suffers from hysteria, Atwood's heroine doesn't 'feel much of anything' and 'hadn't for a long time' (p. 105). Her inability to feel is mentioned several times in the narrative. 'What impressed [Joe] that time, he even mentioned it later, cool he called it, was the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't' (p. 28). She views her inability to feel as a sort of death and finally admits that it is no longer her father's death but her own emotional death that concerns her. At one point she is thumbing through photo albums, hoping to find some pictorial evidence that will pinpoint when the change took place. But the photo albums do not disclose the truth:

> No hints or facts, I didn't know when it had happened. I must have been all right then; but after that I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. (p. 108)

Atwood's heroine cuts herself off from the world where pain and suffering exist and then suffers the psychological trauma of doing so. Because of her inability to feel, the narrator must rehearse emotions, 'what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it' (p. 111).

Atwood's dispassionate heroine also differs in her response to sexual love. Like many traditional gothic novels, *Surfacing* is permeated by a dread of sex. In the following comment Howells explains the conventional gothic attitude towards sexual love:

> [The] dread of sex runs right through Gothic fiction and is basic to many of its conventions of anxiety and terror. Gothic heroines suffer incessantly from persecution mania, and there is a high incidence of hysteria and madness among them which goes with much threatened brutality on the part of the villains. However, the causes of such

> violent feeling are never adequately explained, for Gothic novelists flirt with sexuality, treating it with a mixture of fascination and coy withdrawal from its implications'.[15]

Howells goes on to say that the novelists failed to come to terms with such feelings: 'They wanted to explore and exploit violent emotions, but at the same time they were not certain enough of their own values to revolt against eighteenth-century moral and literary conventions.'[16] An example of the latter is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* where the heroine is ruthlessly pursued by the villainous lover. In Pamela's eyes, the act of love is immoral without an emotional and legal commitment and so she refuses the lover's advances until he commits himself to her through marriage. In other words, the Gothic shows a fear of the act but puts a lot of stress on the emotional commitment. In contrast, Atwood's heroine wants sex to be a purely physical act without any emotional commitment. The narrator's admission that everything she values about Joe 'seems to be physical: the rest is either unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous' (p. 57), illustrates the extent to which she can divorce herself from the emotional. The sex act itself is described in terms which would suggest emotional detachment: '[Joe's] hands at any rate are intelligent, they move over me delicately as a blind man's reading braille, skilled, moulding me like a vase, they're learning me; they repeat patterns he's tried before, they've found out what works, and my body responds that way too, anticipates him, educated, crisp as a typewriter' (p. 68). Although Joe knows what to do to make her body respond, she is not an active participant and then admits 'It's best when you don't know them' (p.68). It is as if her mind watches while her body responds. She uses Joe for her own

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[15] Howells, p. 13.

[16] Howells, p. 14.

physical needs but does not value him as an individual. Later, she hears the sounds of lovemaking coming from David and Anna and thinks 'It's like death . . . the bad part isn't the thing itself but being a witness' (p. 82).

Emphatically, Atwood suggests that sex is linked with violation and death. Nowhere is this more evident than in the gruesome description of childbirth, but as an alternative to pregnancy, contraception seems just as fraught with difficulties. The 'pill', which promised 'love without fear, sex without risk', turns women into 'chemical slot machines' (p. 80) and creates all sorts of new risks.

The concept of botched births, defective femininity and an overwhelming sense of fear and dread are all gothicisms present in *Surfacing* but the monster in this case is an aborted foetus which returns to haunt its creator. We do not understand until the diving scene, the narrator's comments about why she does not feel. Then it becomes horribly apparent. All that she has repressed is presented to the reader in gruesome detail. Instead of a painting, she sees an image from the past:

> It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead.(p. 142)

The body of her father merges with the image of her drowned brother and the memory of her aborted foetus and a connection is made whereby she begins to understand the damage she has both suffered and caused. Her inability to accept the reality of the abortion, led her to piece together 'memories fraudulent as passports' in the mistaken belief that a 'paper house was better than none' (p. 144). She then allowed the repressed image of the 'mutilated' foetus to become a crippling obsession. In admitting her complicity she

realises why the false memories were necessary: 'It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version' (p. 143). She realises that the foetus was a living thing, something 'hiding in [her] as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary [she'd] let them catch it' (p. 145). Unable to accept what she had done, she 'carried that death around inside [her], layering it over, a cyst, a tumor, black pearl' (p. 145). The aborted foetus symbolises everything she has tried to cut out of her life. Like a spectre, the image has pursued its creator and forced its way into her consciousness.

Although the father's 'complicated' and 'tangled' message unlocks the past, and shows her a way of seeing 'true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic' (p. 145), she needs a 'legacy', 'simple as a hand' from the mother to complete the transformation.

The 'rediscovered' mother is a common motif in modern gothic fiction because of the fear and anxiety surrounding one of the most crucial relationships in a woman's life. Atwood's mothers are either dead at the beginning of, or killed off during the course of the narrative but they continue to exert a tremendous influence on the daughters' self images. Certainly, the relationship between mother and daughter is an important aspect of this novel. Lorna Irvine claims that writers such as Atwood, because they recognise 'the pervasive influence of the mother . . . tend to represent it through the daughter's gradually emerging discovery of her female identity.' This, according to Irvine, 'repeatedly dramatizes the necessity of coming to terms with the past.'[17] The narrator in *Surfacing* shows a great deal of ambivalence towards her parents, particularly her mother. In the first place

[17] Lorna Irvine, 'A Psychological Journey: Mothers and Daughters in English-Canadian Fiction', *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), p. 243.

she has concocted an incredible set of lies to protect them from the truth. Having stayed away for nine years, she wants to go back and find them unchanged. But staying away hasn't lessened the mother's influence. As the narrator watches her three companions she imagines that Anna could be her at sixteen, and Joe and David could be the father and brother. The only place left for her is that of her mother. She tries to imagine herself as her mother but realises her mother is a mystery. She wonders what her mother did on those days when she 'would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest' (p. 52). The mother's inability to pass on knowledge results in a threatening isolation for the daughter, while her strength of character and fearlessness in the face of adversity taunt the daughter's lack of resolve.

Her mother's ability to nurture and preserve life is contrasted with the daughter's destruction of life. The narrator links herself as an unborn child with the child she would not allow, and she remembers the time when her brother almost drowned: 'It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar' (p. 32). The narrator can therefore imagine the horror felt by her unborn child and in these terms its destruction takes on grotesque proportions. In a sense she has aborted herself.

In another sense, the narrator is like Frankenstein's monster. She too pursues her creator and laments the injustice of being deliberately deserted by her parents. 'They chose it, they had control over their death, they decided it was time to leave and they left, they set up this barrier. They didn't consider how I would feel, who would take care of me. I'm furious because they let it happen' (p. 172). This of course is another distortion.

The struggle with the mother is a struggle to come to terms with the past. The many references to the dead mother's leather jacket suggest that she carries the ghost of her mother around with her: 'My mother's jacket is hanging on a nail beside the window, there's nobody in it; I press my forehead against it. Leather smell, the smell of loss, irrecoverable' (p. 174). The narrator cannot be like her mother and yet the more she has tried to break with the past, the more confused and anxious she has become. Aware that she has been unsuccessful at cutting herself off from the past, she attempts to re-establish links with the dead mother.

Atwood's narrative explores the ways in which women have allowed themselves to be implicated in the structures of victimisation and oppression. Although her heroine is a victim, she is not an innocent one, and yet throughout the narrative she maintains an illusion of innocence. She thinks of herself as 'helpless', and because of this, others do things to her. She accuses her parents of deserting her but remains oblivious to the pain her abrupt departure may have caused them. Although she thinks of herself as powerless, she is extraordinarily concerned with power. As a child she remembers thinking that a certain purple-black bean would make her 'all-powerful', but when she is tall enough to reach the beans, the magic has disappeared. She says she's glad the bean did not give her power because 'if I'd turned out like the others with power I would have been evil' (p. 37). Her delusion of innocence is the result of equating power with evil and then thinking of herself as powerless.

At first, she is able to conceal her guilt behind the facade of logic. She knows it is irrational to feel guilty about the dead fish because 'killing certain things is all right, food and enemies, fish and mosquitoes' (p. 65). Her

delusion of innocence continues until she sees the dead heron strung up on the tree. At first she identifies with the heron. She equates the violation of the wilderness with her own victimisation at the hands of her supposed husband. But in fact she is a mirror image of the Americans she criticises. She has wrapped herself up in passive innocence just as the Americans have used the 'armour' of 'bland ignorance'. In this way both she and the Americans have insulated themselves against the truth. Of course, when the Americans turn out to be Canadians it does not matter in her eyes what country they are from, 'they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into' (p. 129). When she sees the dead heron for a second time, she realises that her passivity is not innocent: 'I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as I though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd' (p. 130).

Another realisation which surfaces is that childhood is not all 'rabbits with their coloured egg houses, sun and moon orderly above the flat earth, summer always' (p. 131). She has been under the illusion that childhood is a time of innocence but then remembers the acts of barbarity such as throwing the 'bad kind' of leeches into the fire when her mother was not looking. She begins to realise that evil is within everyone:

> To become like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal: it was in us too, it was innate. A thing closed in my head, hand, synapse, cutting off my escape: that was the wrong way, the entrance, redemption was elsewhere, I must have overlooked it. (p. 132)

Atwood's gothic revision is most evident in the visionary scene where there is none of the spectacle of horror so common in the traditional Gothic. Instead, moments of subjective intensity are punctuated with what amounts to almost documentary realism. The events in the third part of *Surfacing* have

been variously described. Some critical commentators see the female gothic descent into madness as an heroic journey, a way of integrating the divided self.[18] But in Atwood's novel, the issue is not so simple. Although the narrator knows that staying alone on the island is absurd 'from any rational point of view', the symbolic descent into the underworld is neither mad nor illogical. In the narrative, there is evidence of planning when the narrator says 'The direction is clear. I see I've been planning this, for how long I can't tell' (p. 167). The narrator undergoes a metaphoric journey into the darkness of the self where all the terrors and fears have to be encountered. There is a fusion of fantasy and reality very suggestive of a dream landscape, so much so, that the narrator experiences what 'might have been a dream, the kind that creates the illusion of being awake' (p. 175). In this way, Atwood introduces the heroine to a reality which has incorporated the supernatural into the natural and through the ritualistic conjuring up of these ghosts, the spirit world which is hidden within the real world, is revealed. Atwood's attention to detail in the midst of an uncanny experience re-establishes a link between the mysterious and the world of fictional reality. Under the circumstances of 'true vision' the mysterious is no longer hidden within the real. When the narrator, like Frankenstein's monster, glances into the mirror, she can't believe what she sees: 'eyes lightblue in dark red skin, hair standing tangled out from [her] head, reflection intruding between [her] eyes and vision' (p. 175), so she turns the mirror to the wall. True vision is only possible when she is no longer a reflection. Yet to achieve a true vision, she has to relinquish the normal world and accept a transformation of her being, a literally altered state of consciousness through which the transfigured state of

[18] Karen F. Stein, 'Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic', in *The Female Gothic*, p. 131.

nature can be revealed. She descends into the landscape and becomes 'ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark' (p. 181). By becoming momentarily 'a place' in which the trees and animals move, the narrator is able to experience the vision of her mother when she too is no longer a reflection. By destroying the 'confining photographs' the narrator sets free the mother's image: 'standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding [the jays]: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder' (p. 182). The rather domestic and yet still ghostly image of the mother, instead of creating the usual 'frisson' of fear, establishes another link between mother and daughter. As the vision is transformed into a jay, we are reminded of the mother's image just before her death: 'skin tight over her curved beak nose, hands on the sheet curled like bird claws clinging to a perch. She peered at me with bright blank eyes' (p. 22). The repetition of the bird-like image emphasises Atwood's contention that the spiritual world can be 'sensed' within the ordinary world of reality.

Atwood's heroine then sees the more terrifying vision of her father: 'He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone' (pp. 186-87). When the wilderness at last reveals itself to her, it has the shape of a wolf: 'it gazes at me for a long time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights . Reflectors. It does not

approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself' (p. 187). So having fused herself with the landscape, what she learns is that total immersion in the spirit world of her dead parents is impossible.

She tries for the first time to think what it would have been like for her parents, the effort it must have taken her father to 'sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order' and for her mother 'collecting the seasons and the weather and her children's faces, the meticulous records that allowed her to omit the other things, the pain and isolation and whatever it was she was fighting against, something in a vanished history, I can never know' (p. 190). What she realises is that her parents lived in a fantasy world — the mother's harmony with the natural world was a facade to hide the fear; the reasonable, thinking father was in fact exploiting the wilderness since as a surveyor; he marked the trees that were to be cut down. For the narrator, the parents finally 'become what they were, human. Something [she] never gave them credit for' (pp.189-90). To remain in the spiritual world means death and she realises 'To prefer life, I owe them that' (p. 188). The spirits recede 'back to the past, inside the skull, is it the same place' (p. 189) and the gothic world of nightmare ends.

Having emerged from her period of psychic aberration, she realises she must 'give up the old belief that [she] is powerless and because of it nothing [she] can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been' (p. 191). Stripped of language and the old ways of defining herself, she finds what she has been seeking all along, but the prize is not a completely new self, only a clear head and a few simple truths.

In *Surfacing*, the narrator heals her psychic split by integrating both components of herself, the independent and assertive with the emotional and nurturant. Part of the healing process is to reclaim the lost child but the rebirth must take place in nature:

> I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (pp. 161-62)

The narrator's sentiments, while suggesting a much healthier mental attitude to life, are not very sensible. So, is this another 'magic baby'? We are reminded of Atwood's comments in *Survival*: 'The Great Canadian Baby is a literary institution; it could in some cases be termed the Baby Ex Machina, since it is lowered at the end of the book to solve problems for the characters which they obviously can't solve for themselves' (p. 207). This baby might be a portent of the future, but then again, it might be another subjective 'misconception', a creature of the narrator's fantasy.

On the one hand, it would seem that in typical Radcliffean style, Atwood explains everything away with the following comment: 'No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull, is it the same place' (p. 189). However, Robert Lecker points out a major difference between Atwood's gothic romances and the conventional gothic horror story in the following comment: 'the resolution of the narrative is usually signalled by the heroine's final escape from a fate worse than death; [but] in Atwood's novels, the heroine remains in the realm of duplicity, and although she may believe that

she has moved out the underworld's mirror, her belief is ultimately shown to be the greatest sign of self-delusion.'[19] Although Atwood's heroine acknowledges that 'withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death' (p. 191), she returns to a way of life that brought about the destruction of self in the first place. So instead of 'resurrection' and 'salvation', Atwood's heroine ends up 'surfacing' on rather a bleak note. Whereas traditional gothic romance provided definitive endings, Atwood's open-ended narrative suggests that self-hood is a process. The ending is, therefore, the last way in which Atwood modifies the gothic form in this novel. The uncertainty which permeates the narrative means that the ghosts are free to return in other forms and other fictions.

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[19] Robert Lecker, 'Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels,' in *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, p. 193.

Chapter 3

Lady Oracle

It was the addiction
to stories, every
story about herself or anyone
led to the sabotage of each address
and all those kidnappings

Stories that could be told
on nights like these to account for the losses,
litanies of escapes, bad novels, thrillers
deficient in villains;
now there is nothing to write.

. . . . . .

Who knows what stories
would ever satisfy her
who knows what savageries
have been inflicted on her
and others by herself and others
in the name of freedom,
in the name of paper [1]

While Joan Foster's mock death is foreshadowed in *Surfacing* when the heroine plunges into the water 'blue and cool as redemption', the heroine of *Lady Oracle* surfaces from Lake Ontario covered in orange peel and smelling of dead fish. Joan Foster seems doomed to a life of ignominy. In *Lady Oracle,* Margaret Atwood once again uses the conventions of gothic romance to expose the delusion of female innocence and what Atwood herself calls 'the perils of gothic thinking.'[2] Atwood parodies the conventions and in doing

[1] Margaret Atwood, 'Gothic Letter on a Hot Night', in *You Are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 15-16.

[2] J. R. Struthers, 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 6 (Spring, 1977), p. 23.

so exposes one of the key strategies through which female duplicity reveals itself.[3] 'Duplicity, in a metaphorical sense,' according to Sherrill E. Grace, 'describes a doubleness of intention or purpose in order to deceive.'[4] And this novel is profoundly duplicitous. Anti-gothic is Atwood's term for the novel which she links to the treatment of the gothic in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.[5] Coral Ann Howells, commenting on *Northanger Abbey,* suggests that 'Jane Austen views [the] Gothic with a wide imaginative awareness, keenly perceiving its absurdities and its comic potential yet at the same time giving it credit for its often bizarre insights into human nature'.[6] The remark is relevant to Atwood's treatment of the gothic in *Lady Oracle.* She does not take the gothic to task because it is different from life, but because it can so easily distort one's real life responses. And yet, at the same time, the gothic is the vehicle for important insights in the book. Like the narrator of *Surfacing,* Joan Foster, the heroine of *Lady Oracle,* uses gothic romance as a model, but our attention is much more actively drawn to the gothic elements in *Lady Oracle* than in *Surfacing*. Atwood makes Joan a writer of 'Costume Gothics', and we are invited, all through the novel, to compare Joan's story with her work in progress. The novel therefore focuses, much more sharply than *Surfacing* on the relationship between popular gothic romance and the realities of a woman's life. Although Atwood examines real fears and anxieties surrounding the female condition, *Lady Oracle* is a comic revision of gothic fiction. It has all

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[3] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 80.

[4] Sherrill E. Grace, 'Margaret Atwood and the Poetics of Duplicity', *The Art of Margaret Atwood,* p. 56.

[5] Struthers, *Essays on Canadian Writing,* p. 25.

[6] Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery,* p. 114.

the right elements —'the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned' but it is 'a Gothic gone wrong.'[7]

Whereas the story-line of *Surfacing* is relatively simple, the story-line of *Lady Oracle* takes on labyrinthine complexity. The novel begins with the comment:

> I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. . . . The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would mistake for solid reality. At first I thought I'd managed it. (p. 3)

The first part of the novel takes place in the present with Joan Foster's resurrection in Terremoto, Italy. Joan tells us that she is the successful but anonymous author of a number of 'Costume Gothics'. The story of Charlotte, the heroine of *Stalked By Love,* and Joan's reconstructed (and we suspect, much revised) life story, unfold in the subsequent sections of the narrative. But what begin as separate but parallel stories, merge into a nightmarish fantasy in the final section where an even more startling discovery awaits the reader.

Although the first person narrative voice which tells the story seems to be Joan Foster's, it is not. Joan's flight to Terremoto and her ensuing attempt to escape are disrupted by an investigative reporter. He has been on Joan's trail for some time, 'stalking' his prey, and when he knocks 'gently' on the door, Joan hits him over the head with the Cinzano bottle and he ends up 'in the hospital with no one to talk to' (p. 344). With characteristic contrariness, Joan pours out her soul to him. She tells all knowing that 'it will make a pretty weird story, once he's written it', giving the assurance that she 'didn't tell any

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[7] Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto, 1976; rpt. Toronto: Bantam, 1976), p. 234. Future references to this edition will appear in the text.

lies. Well, not very many' (p. 344). The novel that the reader has in fact just finished, then, is a reporter's account of a story told to him by a 'compulsive and romantic' liar. While the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* tells lies in order to protect herself, it soon becomes evident in *Lady Oracle* that Joan is obsessed with the desire to tell stories. Joan constantly finds herself in implausible situations and explains: 'This was the reason I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing' (p. 150). Atwood's mediated narrative parodies the traditional gothic narrative and its attempt to add authenticity to an improbable story. A somewhat daunting task awaits the reader, who, like the reporter, becomes involved in piecing together the fragments of Joan's life in an attempt to make sense out of her confusion.

We can't help but feel that there is more than a little of the gothic romances Joan later writes, in the story of her early life. The text itself later bears out our suspicions. Joan is, first of all a victim, and her victimisation begins early in life with her mother as tormentor, constantly trying to transform her unacceptable daughter. This section of the book dealing with childhood, with its stories of transformation, has more to do with fairy tales than with the gothic. But it sows the seeds for later gothic developments and its exaggerations reflect the story-teller Joan is to become. The first event is a ballet recital. Joan has been enrolled in dancing classes in the hope of transforming a chubby child into a thin one, as well as because they are 'fashionable'. Joan adores the lessons and is quite good at the actual dancing although she is reprimanded by the teacher, Miss Flegg, for 'thumping'. For the recital, Joan is to become a butterfly and hopes for a magical transformation. But Joan's mother decides she looks ridiculous in tutu and wings and instead Joan becomes a 'mothball' in teddy bear costume with a

sign around her neck. Joan's improvised stomping becomes a dance of 'rage and destruction' as she throws herself into the part. The mothball interpretation is an enormous success and Miss Flegg is congratulated for her 'priceless touch'. Unfortunately, the success does very little for Joan's shattered ego.

Joan, in retelling the story, claims to sympathise with Miss Flegg and realises that the 'gay','artistic' and 'spiritual' dance was 'being reduced to something laughable and unseemly by the presence of a fat little girl who was more like a giant caterpillar than a butterfly, more like a white grub if you were really going to be accurate' (p. 44). But Joan is also convinced that without her mother's interference, Miss Flegg would not have noticed. Therefore each retelling strengthens the sense of the mother's betrayal. Although Joan is vaguely aware that she is plumper than the other children, this incident brings the issue into the open. Fat, ugly girls will not do.

Since the magical transformation promised by ballet is not forthcoming, Joan decides to try Brownies. Once again there is the suggestion of transformation: 'Frowns and scowls make ugly things, Smiling gives them fairy wings' (p. 54). However, Joan's mother, in her characteristic fashion, does not choose the nearest Brownies but picks one in a better neighborhood. So at the age of eight Joan must cross one of the many ravines that wind through the city of Toronto. The mother is terrified at what might be lurking in the bushes and arranges for Joan to walk with a few older girls. Unfortunately the older girls torment her. One week, their routine takes on a more sinister tone when Joan is actually tied to a post at the end of the bridge and the girls fail to return. She is left to be rescued somewhat later by a kindly gentleman, but as he is walking her home, they are accosted by the

frantic mother. Joan is wrenched from the man and slapped across the face, and the incident so enrages the mother that Joan is forced to quit Brownies. Once again, the magical transformation is not forthcoming, and the whole incident is a grotesque parody of the traditional gothic story of victimisation, full of reversals. The tormentor is not the gentleman but Joan's companions and her mother.

The one great success of Joan's childhood is a monstrous transformation into 'the Fat Lady'. Joan refuses to be made into one of her mother's beautiful objects and instead, overeats and becomes grossly fat. She acknowledges that '[the] war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body' (p. 67). There is another reason for her overeating. She overhears a conversation which suggests that she was an unwanted child and that her mother would have preferred an abortion. This leads Joan to wonder '[did] I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn't be able to get rid of me?' (p. 76). Overeating enables her to turn herself into something huge and powerful and sexually invulnerable and yet, paradoxically, the 'magic coat of blubber' creates an illusion of 'invisibility'. Joan is therefore able to eavesdrop on her friends and experience 'vicarious access to the sexual mysteries' (p. 95) and yet remain aloof from the practicalities of threatening sexual advances.

In a sense, Joan's 'Fat Lady' image marks the beginning of the first of many double lives. Outwardly she is 'Miss Personality' and plays the role of 'kindly aunt and wisewoman to a number of the pancake-madeup, cashmere-sweatered, pointy-breasted girls in the class' (p. 91). But underneath the fat is a seething monster full of 'hatred and jealousy', who would like to reveal the 'duplicitous monster' she knows herself to be.

Obesity nourishes Joan's basically fraudulent nature. Disguised as the

fat companion of Aunt Lou, Joan enjoys many of the delights of adult life and is introduced to the world of fantasy, fiction and most importantly, the spiritualism of the Reverend Leda Sprott, proprietor of Jordan Chapel and devotee of 'Automatic Writing'. Obesity is, therefore, indirectly responsible for Joan's later vocation as a gothic novelist.

When the beloved Aunt Lou dies, Joan inherits a substantial sum of money on the condition that she lose a hundred pounds. Like a modern day version of Rapunzel, Joan finds the means of escaping her predicament (that of an overbearing mother), in her own body. By losing weight, she transforms herself into a ravishing red-head but like the narrator in *Surfacing*, she finds that there is something missing. She has never developed the usual female fears and at first finds the sexual innuendoes and advances somewhat disconcerting. At times she is so lonely and afraid that she longs to be fat again: 'It would be an insulation, a cocoon. Also it would be a disguise. I could be merely an onlooker again, with nothing too much expected of me. Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility I felt naked, pruned, as though some essential covering was missing' (p. 141). Once Joan loses the weight she must seek another disguise. Her constant desire for transformation seems to stem from a childhood inability to please the mother: 'The only way I could have helped her to her satisfaction would have been to change into someone else, but I didn't know this yet' (p. 51). Her desire for 'more than one life,' (p. 141) establishes a pattern she will repeat incessantly.

Joan flees to England, hoping to find castles and princesses, but finds instead 'a lot of traffic and a large number of squat people with bad teeth' (p. 143). She longs for an heroic seduction and instead gets a middle aged lover,

the 'Count', 'dressed in a pair of blue-and-white-striped pajamas' (p. 149). She surrenders her virginity because she is too embarrassed to admit she did not know he was making advances. She falls in love and marries Arthur, a 'melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic, and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron,' (p. 165) only to discover that he bears little resemblance to his romantic namesake.

As a 'thin red-headed ball stomper', Joan has the 'right shape' but 'the wrong past' (p. 141) so she begins to add a few salacious details to her life's story, something that befits her appearance and also what she imagines Arthur would want to hear. What begins fairly innocently in order to avoid embarrassing explanations, becomes a monstrous deception. Joan later admits that the lies are not just a form of 'self-defense'; instead she devises 'an entire spurious past for this shadow on a piece of paper' (p. 89). For Arthur's benefit, she even invents a dead mother, 'a kind, placid woman who died of a rare disease' (p. 37).

By now transformed into a gothic heroine, Joan becomes an active participant in the drama of her victimisation. If we examine her marriage we can see her actively pursuing the role of the helpless, exploited female. She disguises herself as an inept and vulnerable housewife supposedly for Arthur's benefit, but manages to fool even Arthur's friends who think of her as 'placid, sloppy and rather stupid' (p. 216). She acquires a reputation for being 'absentminded' and since Arthur's friends find this 'endearing' and begin to expect it of her, she adds it to her 'repertoire of deficiencies'. Although Joan says 'For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be' (p. 212), this is just another deception. Joan admits that her inept pretence does not 'strain [her] powers of invention'

(p. 212). Both she and Arthur view her housewifely role as a performance which will continue as long as Arthur keeps up the applause. In a sense the performance liberates Joan from actually having to do and be something useful, but eventually the duplicity involved in such a performance creates marital discord.

Joan turns to fiction as a means of escaping a reality that never quite lives up to her expectations. She takes seriously the Count's advice that 'Escape literature . . . should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader' (p. 155). While the fictional world offers Joan an escape from the tedium of domesticity and nurtures her basically duplicitous nature, the writing becomes important for another reason:

> The really important thing . . . was the fact that I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that; people called me by that name and I had authentic documents to prove it. But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt. (pp.214-15)

Joan manages to muddle along, keeping her two identities quite separate and her past well hidden. Arthur remains in the apartment and the 'cloaked, sinuous and faintly menacing stranger' (p. 217) remains in the 'Costume Gothics'. Unfortunately, the strain of her double life begins to surface: 'It was true I had two lives, but on off days I felt that neither of them were completely real' (p. 218). Of course, ironically, neither is real.

Joan becomes trapped and isolated within a web of deceit and begins to experience the paranoia of a gothic heroine. In fact, the real horror of Joan's life is that, like the traditional gothic heroine, she has nothing useful to do. Indeed, as Tania Modleski points out, one of Ann Radcliffe's explicit purposes in *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* was to warn women against

indulging in paranoid fancies and to exhort them to keep busy in their solitude.[8] In a sense, it is the loneliness and isolation which bring on Joan's delusions of persecution.

Unfortunately, Joan's anonymity as Louisa K. Delacourt conflicts with her lust for recognition. There seems little point in juggling two identities when no one can admire her cleverness. The publication of the 'Lady Oracle' poems enables Joan to add yet another identity to her repertoire and she acknowledges: 'not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many' (p. 247). The poems, thought to be an angry feminist attack on the institution of marriage, are an enormous success. Much to Joan's apparent dismay, she becomes a cult figure and is sent off across Canada on publicity tours. The success of the poems and her affair with the 'Royal Porcupine' mark the beginning of yet another life. Her lover is like the romantic, dangerous heroes of her novels. She has finally found someone whose imagination is as bizarre as hers and together they 'waltzed all over the ballroom floor of his warehouse, he in his top hat and nothing else, [she] in a lace tablecloth, to the music of the Mantovani strings' (p. 256). When they aren't waltzing or making love, they are frequenting junk shops for 'nineteenth-century trivia' and 'cultural detritus'. With the Royal Porcupine by her side, Joan no longer needs to escape into the fantasy world of fiction.

At the same time, however, Joan begins to experience many of the problems of the gothic heroine. She becomes involved in a terrorist plot; she is being blackmailed by Fraser Buchanan; and she is receiving threatening phone calls. Then, much to Joan's horror, the dashing adventurer transforms

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[8] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 63.

himself into a 'junior accountant' by cutting his hair and shaving off his beard. Even his desire for a more permanent relationship threatens Joan. She knows that she cannot live with him because '[for] him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for [her] it would mean there was no fantasy, and therefore no escape' (p. 272). Even for as skilful a dissembler as Joan, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep separate the strands of her real life and her writing begins to suffer. All the time that she is with the Royal Porcupine, she hasn't written a word and wonders if this is the reason 'why [her] creatures seemed more real than usual, nearer to [her], charged with an energy greater than [she] gave them?' (p. 279). Caught in a web of embarrassing and possibly life-threatening disclosures, Joan plans one final escape.

Although Joan makes numerous attempts to come to terms with her fragmented self-image, the novel is haunted by an uncertain sense of identity which begins with her name:

> Did [my mother] name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played — beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men — or because she wanted me to be successful? . . . Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn't have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille LeSueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat.' (p. 38)

As she develops into a fat young girl, Joan begins to suspect it was because Joan Crawford was thin. Later when she is suspected of evil doings by the citizens of Terremoto, Joan thinks it might have been Joan of Arc she was named after and wonders whether her mother realised 'what happened to women like that?' (p. 337).

In the novel, Atwood suggests that a destructive relationship with one's

mother can contribute to an uncertain sense of identity. Throughout the narrative, Joan is haunted by the mother's image, variously described as 'menacing and cold', 'a monster', 'a rotting albatross' and 'a vortex, a dark vacuum'. The daughter is supposed to make up for any real or imagined deficiencies in the mother's life. The mother is to be 'the manager, the creator, the agent', whereas Joan is to be 'the product'. This sort of attitude on the mother's part leads to confrontation. As Joan reflects:

> Her plans for me weren't specific. They were vague but large, so that whatever I did accomplish was never the right thing. But she didn't push all the time; . . . It wasn't that she was aggressive and ambitious, although she was both these things. Perhaps she wasn't aggressive or ambitious enough. If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize. (pp. 64-65)

What Joan does not acknowledge is the fact that there are many similarities between mother and daughter. The mother establishes a pattern of deceptive behaviour which Joan can copy. One of the delights of Joan's childhood is to watch her mother put on make-up. On these occasions Joan realises her mother is longing for transformation also: 'these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate' (p. 63). The mother's monstrous image is revealed to Joan in a dream but 'instead of three reflections [the mother] had three actual heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks' (p. 64). In a sense both mother and daughter disguise their monstrous selves behind facades of seemingly ordinary behaviour. The mother did not want things to be different from everybody else's; rather 'She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everybody else's' (p. 68). The mother, of course, includes Joan in this

category. Joan searches for a city where she could be 'free not to be [herself]. I didn't want anything too different or startling, I just wanted to fit in without being known' (p. 139). Both search for a sense of belonging and yet engage in activities which draw attention to themselves. The mother puts on a false face and Joan puts on outrageous outfits. Both escape the tedium of life by delving into the world of fiction. The mother pretends to be reading a book on child psychology but is reading '*The Fox*, an historical novel about the Borgias' (p. 67). Joan will later write 'Costume Gothics' while pretending to be doing something else. Joan describes her mother as 'too intense to be likable' (p.181) which is similar to the mother's plea to Joan 'Why do you have to go to extremes with everything?' (p. 122). The daughter's desire for love and marriage is a reflection of the mother's and yet both end up with husbands whom they turn into fools. After the mother's death, Joan discovers the defaced photograph album and imagines her mother 'working with precise fury, excising the past, which had turned into the present and betrayed her, stranding her in this house, this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit' (p. 180). Both mother and daughter have unsuccessfully attempted to obliterate the past.

Although the early events in Joan's life suggest victimisation, what becomes clear to the reader is that while Joan may look vulnerable, she is really indestructible. Although victimised heroines are frequently a source of identification for Atwood's protagonists, they inevitably prove to be destructive models.[9] Such is the case in *Lady Oracle*. Joan becomes imprisoned in a tower of mythology of her own making. She desperately wants to be the 'persecuted victim and the courageous heroine' of gothic

[9] Barbara Hill Rigney, *Margaret Atwood* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 9.

literature but although she identifies with the gullible victim, she is far from blameless. The Royal Porcupine tells her: 'You stomp all over people's egos without even knowing you're doing it, . . . You're emotionally clumsy' (p. 270). Joan's childish 'mothball stomp' has become a way of life and she continues ploughing her way through others' lives regardless of the consequences. What impresses the reader is Joan's total lack of responsibility. Absolutely nothing is her fault. Joan's destruction of the mother is particularly sinister. Joan delights in foiling all the mother's attempts to encourage weight loss. At one point the mother breaks down in tears when Joan arrives home wearing 'a new lime-green car coat with toggles down the front, flashing like a neon melon' and demands of Joan, 'What have I done to make you behave like this?' (p. 86). Joan's sense of elation and power at the sight of the distraught and weeping mother is particularly vicious. But she continues her defiance. Joan refuses to go to boarding school, she will not go to university, she takes on menial jobs which her mother finds degrading. When Joan loses the weight, the mother becomes 'distraught' and 'uncertain' and Joan's explanation seems suitably callous: 'making me thin was her last available project. She's finished all the houses, there was nothing left for her to do, and she had counted on me to last her forever' (p. 123). Joan pretends to be 'badly frightened' by the mother's knife attack and uses it as an excuse for moving out, something she had been planning to do all along. Eventually, Joan's 'mothball stomp' destroys the mother. After the mother's death, Joan is 'overcome by a wave of guilt' (p. 178) but projects these feelings onto her father. Blaming her father absolves her of any moral responsibility for her mother's demise. But Joan is haunted by the mother's image which she carries around her neck 'like an iron locket' (p. 65). The sinister image with

the 'murderous red' fingernails and the 'curious double mouth, the real one showing through the false one like a shadow' (p. 65) suggests the evil stepmother of fairytales and serves to reaffirm Joan's innocence.

Joan mistreats even those she professes to love. Aunt Lou's bizarre appearance, which was a comfort to Joan as a child, becomes an embarrassment to the teenager and so she, too, is abandoned. Joan claims to love Arthur and yet ridicules everything he does. She even blames Arthur for her infidelity. 'For some complicated and possibly sadistic reason of his own he'd allowed me to become involved with a homicidal maniac and it was time he knew about it' (p. 274). She wants out of the adulterous affair and thinks that telling Arthur will prompt him to do something about it.

There are many discrepancies in Joan's story. Because of her tendency to emphasise certain details and exaggerate others, we begin to suspect that Joan's so-called biography might be just another 'Costume Gothic'. Joan claims to have been lonely and unhappy as a child but seems popular and involved with her fellow classmates. Nor is she remembered by them as being grossly fat. This point is illustrated poignantly when Joan and Arthur are about to marry. In telling Arthur about her past, she has fabricated memories that suit her new slim image so that when they arrive at Braeside Park, she is terrified of running into some former acquaintance and then to her dismay, the Reverend E.P. Revele turns out to be Leda Sprott, the former proprietor of Jordan Chapel. After the ceremony Leda talks to the bride first and Joan asks that she not tell Arthur what she used to look like, to which Leda replies 'What do you mean? . . . You were a perfectly nice young girl, as far as I could tell. . . . But don't worry, I won't give away your past, though I must say there are worse tragedies in life than being a little overweight' (p. 208). A similar situation occurs when Arthur introduces Joan to his friend Don and the wife,

Marlene, turns out to be the former Brownie tormentor. As they are introduced Joan imagines the '[wads] of fat' and her 'dormant past [bursting] into rank life' (p. 231) but Marlene does not remember Joan. Instead of being grateful, Joan bitterly resents Marlene's inability to remember: 'It seemed very unjust that an experience so humiliating to me hadn't touched her at all' (p. 232). These two examples suggest the possibility that Joan's perceptions of childhood have not only been distorted through time, but grossly embellished to fit into Joan's vision of herself as the victimised heroine. Like the narrator in *Surfacing*, Joan has based her life on false premises.

These false premises are later translated into the gothic fiction that gives Joan a sense of power. Here, fictional characters can be manipulated and controlled, virgins can be rewarded, and adulterous wives punished. Acting like a 'fairy godmother', Joan can 'scatter joy like rice all over [her] characters and dismiss them into bliss' (p. 321). But the duplicity of demanding that life be organised like a gothic novel turns Joan into a bully. She continues to manipulate people in much the same way as she manipulates her fictional characters, by refusing to see them except in fictional terms. Not only does she cast herself into certain roles, but like a director or stage manager she begins the novel by introducing the reader to the cast of characters who will play a significant role in her own story:

> [There] in front of me . . . was everyone I had left on the other side . . . Arthur was the nearest; behind him was the Royal Porcupine, otherwise known as Chuck Brewer, in his long pretentious cape; then Sam and Marlene and the others. Leda Sprott fluttered like a bedsheet off to one side, and I could see Fraser Buchanan's leather-patched elbow sticking out from where he lurked behind a seaside bush. Further back, my mother, wearing a navy-blue suit and a white hat, my father indistinct by her side; and my Aunt Lou. Aunt Lou was the only one who wasn't looking at me. (pp. 4-5)

Although a great deal of the humor in the novel is directed at herself, Joan disguises her spite and venom in comical descriptions. By mocking the pretensions of others, particularly the males in her life, she renders them ineffectual and unthreatening.

Notwithstanding the fact that Joan understands very little about what goes on around her, she does understand the function of popular literature. Although she admits that her books, 'with their covers featuring gloomy, foreboding castles and apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns', serve to 'perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted', she understands the 'quintessential need of [her] readers for escape' (p. 30). 'Escape', we are told, 'wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers' (p. 31). She offers her readers 'a vision of a better world, however preposterous' (p. 32). And yet the phrase 'however preposterous' suggests that Joan acknowledges the deception involved in such literature. But Joan's understanding does not prevent her from inflicting the myth of the victimised heroine on herself.

Joan's involvement in her own fantasies is ultimately a learning experience since it leads her to the writing of the 'Lady Oracle' poems, so central to the novel. In the poems, written under the influence of some mysterious force, there seems to be a central figure who keeps reappearing and each time it's the same woman. After a while Joan can almost see her: 'she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat. She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power (p. 224). When it comes to interpreting oracles, Joan's ability to understand characters doesn't extend to

herself, so she doesn't think that this mysterious figure has anything to do with someone as 'happy' as herself. The figure remains a mystery until near the end of the novel when Joan has a ghostly visitation from her mother and attempts to reach her by entering the mirror; 'but the glass' she says 'was between us' (p. 330). Nevertheless, Joan finally accepts some of the responsibility for their disastrous relationship:

> She had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn't stand the view from her window, life was her curse. How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. What was the charm, what would set her free? (p. 331)

It is in the writing of the 'Lady Oracle' poems that Joan finally comes to confront the figure of her mother and to achieve some kind of reconciliation with her past.

In *Lady Oracle,* Atwood explores the relationship between fantasy and reality but never quite shows the reader a clear path through the maze. Possibly Joan's method of writing is initially responsible for blurring the edges between fact and fiction. When the fictional heroines get into situations that Joan can't resolve, she enacts the scene as a stimulus to her imaginative powers. An early example is the situation in *Escape from Love* when Joan is pacing out the route about to be taken by the heroine as she flees from the illicit attentions of Sir Edmund DeVere. In real life, Joan is trying to think up a way of escaping from the lecherous Polish Count. His behaviour is beginning to frighten her. At a crucial point in the story the heroine, Samantha, realises 'there was a hand on her arm, and a voice, hoarse with passion, breathed her name' (p. 164). Joan, in fact, does feel a hand on her arm and screams, and the next thing she knows she 'was lying on top of a skinny, confused-looking

young man' (p. 164). Arthur does rescue Joan from the Count, although it requires some manoeuvring on her part to get him to play the role. In another episode, Joan's experiment with the occult leads to unforeseen difficulties both for herself and Penelope, the gothic heroine of *Love, My Ransom.* Penelope's '*own reflection disappeared . . . further into the mirror she went, and further, till she seemed to be walking on the other side of the glass, in a land of indistinct shadows*' (p. 220). Joan experiences the same gothic sensation of 'going along a narrow passage that led downward, [and] the certainty that if I could only turn the corner . . . I would find the thing, the truth or word or person that was mine, that was waiting for me' (p. 223). Never one to leave well-enough alone, Joan keeps up the candle experiment for about three months until one day the candle goes out and she is 'stuck there, in the midst of darkness, unable to move' (p. 225).

Joan, however, becomes involved in her own fantasies most obviously through the 'Costume Gothic' she is writing at the time of her 'death'. Interspersed with the main story of Joan's life are several passages from *Stalked By Love* and as we follow the plot, it becomes apparent that Charlotte, the gothic heroine, and Felicia, the adulterous and evil wife, are reflections of Joan herself. In *Stalked By Love,* Joan cannot seem to get rid of Felicia even though she is deteriorating badly. As a wife in a gothic romance, Felicia must be killed off to make way for Charlotte with her 'intact virtue and tidy ways', but Joan is beginning to sympathise with Felicia even though such a sentiment is against the rules of her own fiction where 'all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both' (p. 321). By the novel's end, Joan has become so entangled in the plot of *Stalked By Love* that she enters the maze as the fictional character, Felicia, and finds that the murdered wives are, in fact, her discarded selves:

> *Suddenly she found herself in the central plot. A stone bench ran along one side, and on it were seated four women. Two of them looked a lot like her, with red hair and green eyes and small white teeth. The third was middle-aged, dressed in a strange garment that ended halfway up her calves, with a ratty piece of fur around her neck. The last was enormously fat. She was wearing a pair of pink tights and a short pink skirt covered with spangles. From her head sprouted two antennae, like a butterfly's, and a pair of obviously false wings was pinned to her back.* (p. 341).

The fusion of the Fat Lady and the ballerina into one is very significant. Earlier in the narrative, Joan explains that when she looks in the mirror she does not see the beautiful and intelligent woman that Arthur does but instead sees the outline of her former fat body surrounding her ' like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on [her] own (p. 216). Joan's descent into the fictional landscape fuses the two images and brings with it the revelation that the wings she has coveted since childhood are 'obviously false'. And it is this knowledge which transforms Joan's life:

> *[Redmond's] mouth was hard and rapacious, his eyes smoldered. "Let me take you away, " he whispered. "Let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always".*

Even though these are the very sentiments that Joan has waited all her life to hear, neither she nor Felicia succumbs:

> *"Always", she said, almost yielding. "Forever". Once she had wanted these words, she had waited all her life for someone to say them. . . . She pictured herself whirling slowly across a ballroom floor, a strong arm around her waist. . . .*
> *"No", she said. "I know who you are".*
> *The flesh fell away from his face, revealing the skull behind it; he stepped towards her, reaching for her throat. . . .*(p. 343).

In rejecting Redmond's advances Joan is willing to revise not only the ending of her fiction but of her life-as-victim, as well. After momentarily canvassing her options, she courageously stands her ground and fights back by hitting the

intruding reporter over the head with the Cinzano bottle.

Atwood has remarked in an interview that the maze in *Lady Oracle* is 'a descent into the underworld. There's a passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* which I found very useful, where Aeneas goes to the underworld to learn about his future. He's guided by the Sibyl and he learns what he has to from his dead father and then he returns home.'[10] Barbara Godard's comments on the labyrinth reinforce this link with a descent and a surfacing. She suggests that the labyrinth is 'a metaphor for an interior journey to the source of inner power and for a quest to find a mythic prehistory when women were revered. In this union with the mother figure, they actively initiate a process of rebirth, which occurs when they return to the surface. In this symbolic second birth, they find their own freedom.'[11] Joan, however, prepares the reader for a messy descent into the labyrinth of her own fiction by informing us that 'in any labyrinth [she] would have let go of the thread in order to follow a wandering light, a fleeting voice' (p. 152). As readers, we begin to suspect that the maze is just another elaborate ploy, an assessment which is reinforced by Joan's comment that 'I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this, as my mother would have said' (p. 345).

The ending is characteristically ambiguous, for Joan's final comment that she won't write 'Costume Gothics' any more is undermined by her saying: 'But maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you' (p. 345). Perhaps the future will be 'better for her' than the past — but our Joan is still going for

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[10] Linda Sandler, 'Interview with Margaret Atwood,' *Malahat Review*, 41 (1977), p. 16.

[11] Barbara Godard, 'My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert,' *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 26 (1983), pp. 33-34.

fantasy. Grace sees the ambiguity of the ending as a failure by both Joan and Atwood 'to face up to the moral dilemma presented in the novel'[12] but it seems to me that this judgement completely misses the tone of the novel and its fun. Do we really want Joan to mend her ways at the end? We've had too much of a good time with her. And who would want to take away from Atwood the mastery of 'a blend of gleefulness and gravity'?[13]

With *Lady Oracle* we see the gothic in comic mode as a clever, complex method of exploration of the female consciousness. It accommodates the problem of the involvement of the mother in female identity and shows its persistent relevance as a mythic structure for women in the twentieth century. And that is the dilemma posed by the novel, for those aspects of the gothic which serve to illuminate women's fears and anxieties may also present a danger to those who chose to live by these precepts. If you start to take them seriously, so seriously in fact that, like Joan, you identify with them to the extent that you begin to live life according to the tenets of a gothic heroine, then you risk losing touch with reality completely. *Lady Oracle* and *Northanger Abbey* are anti-gothic, but they also, as Howells suggests, revel in it.

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[12] Grace, *Violent Duality*, p. 127.

[13] Beverly Farmer's words about Iris Murdoch, in a review of *The Message to the Planet*, in *The Weekend Australian*, February 17-18, 1990, p. 5.

Chapter 4

Bodily Harm

> What she sees has not altered; only the
> way she sees it. It's all exactly the same.
> Nothing is the same.[1]

Margaret Atwood examines the pattern of victimisation from a more political perspective in her fifth novel, *Bodily Harm.* Atwood has said, '[by] "politics" . . . I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what. Such material enters a writer's work . . . because a writer is an observer, a witness.'[2] But the fact that this novel has a strong political dimension does not mean that we do not find in it the gothic elements that have become familiar to us in the other novels. Commenting on the gothic aspects of the novel, Howells says, 'for all its modern Toronto and Caribbean scenarios [it] is traditional female gothic minimally transformed with its insistence on pervasive threats to the protagonist and her final incarceration, the dread of every gothic heroine.'[3] I believe, however, that there are significant transformations of the gothic in this novel, as Margaret Atwood appropriates the conventions of gothic romance to reconstruct a personal and political nightmare. One of the artist figures in the novel says 'What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can *see* it' (p. 208). One of the ways of

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), p. 300. Future references to this edition will be included in the text.

[2] Atwood, *Second Words*, p. 394

[3] Howells, *Private and Fictional Words*, p. 58.

making visible (perhaps the principal way in Atwood's fictional world) is to dislocate or distort as in gothic fiction. The concept of distortion as 'true vision' is present in a number of short fictions: for example, in 'Instructions for the Third Eye' Atwood writes: 'You find too that what you see depends partly on what you want to look at and partly on how.'[4] But most importantly, in this novel, Atwood reifies or makes literal the heroine's fears, thereby making it a more contemporary gothic novel. The gothic horrors are not created by an over-active imagination, as in *Lady Oracle,* but by a much more horrifying reality. Once again there is a crucial difference between the conventional gothic horror story and Atwood's reconstructed gothic romance. Whereas in the former, the heroine is eventually rescued, for Atwood's heroine there is no final salvation.

The heroine of this gothic tale is Rennie Wilford, a Toronto journalist. She falsely assumes that her status as a middle-class Canadian exempts her from the persecution and torture that other, less-developed communities must endure. As her security is stripped from her, she is forced into the realisation that marginality and lack of involvement do not guarantee immunity from victimisation.

Like Joan Foster, Rennie experiences persecution in early childhood. As the only child in an adult household, she is trapped within a very respectable but undemonstrative family. There is no need for Rennie to embellish the grim reality of a lonely and oppressive childhood growing up in the ominously named 'Griswold'. One particularly painful memory is the fearful realisation that she is about to be shut up in a cellar for something she had done but is unable to remember. What she does remember is the cool

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[4] Margaret Atwood, 'Instructions for the Third Eye', in *Murder in the Dark* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983), p. 61.

detachment with which the grandmother puts the child in the cellar — not even for a gross misdemeanor, for the cellar is punishment even 'for making a noise for crying' (p. 53). The novel is concerned throughout with deceptive appearances and the image of Griswold alerts us to the menace which lies behind the facade. Griswold looks 'picturesque' from a distance but in reality is 'full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you'd want to go into' (p. 18). Griswold forms a 'subground' in Rennie's life, 'something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there' (p. 18). Even though Rennie 'tries to avoid thinking about Griswold' (p. 18), it is a ghostly presence which returns again and again to haunt her life.

Although Rennie escapes the physical clutches of the town, she is tainted by its standards of 'decency' and 'respectability' by which everything in Griswold is judged. Rennie knows exactly what Griswold would think about her recent operation: 'Cancer was a front-parlour subject, but it wasn't in the same class as a broken leg or a heart attack or even a death. It was apart, obscene almost, like a scandal; it was something you brought upon yourself' (p. 82). Rennie learns as a child 'how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them' (p. 54), so in a way, Griswold is responsible for teaching Rennie how to avoid involvement and commitment. Escaping Griswold is the only viable alternative to the 'living death' Rennie's mother endures, but unfortunately for Rennie, Griswold is not easily disposed of, and the loneliness and isolation of childhood continue into adult life.

Rennie arrives in Toronto with real 'ambitions' and a belief in a 'real story', but finds like many young people, that idealism does not pay the bills; so she foregoes the issues and writes about the people involved in the issues. Like the heroines in *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle,* Rennie learns to

compromise. But unlike the others, Rennie does not wallow in self-pity, nor does she blame anyone for foisting the compromise upon her. The desire to say something 'legitimate' lingers, but for the most part Rennie is content with superficialities. Writing from the sidelines provides Rennie with a cloak of invisibility. She would much rather write about performers and celebrities than suffer the 'exposure' of being written about. As a professional observer of life, she is protected from involvement. Writing about trivia also enables her to pursue 'neutrality' and she thinks of herself as lucky because she can manage 'these small absences from real life' (p. 16). Rennie's professional compromise becomes a way of life so that even when she must face the prospect of breast cancer, she continues to think along the old lines and the way she would approach the subject in an article: '"Cancer, The Coming Thing." *Homemakers* might take it, or *Chatelaine*. How about "The Cutoff Point"?' (p. 27). She continues to observe life rather than participate in it until the end, when 'massive involvement' is forced upon her.

Atwood has said of her fiction that for the most part the characters create the world they inhabit. The 'I' of *Surfacing* and Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* are guilty of bringing upon themselves the evils they are struggling to overcome. They suffer the consequences of retreating into a fantasy world to escape the 'real' world and its dangers. However, in *Bodily Harm* Atwood is concerned with the reality and not the fantasy, of victimisation. The protagonist of *Bodily Harm* must contend with the 'uncompromising realities'[5] of a disfiguring mastectomy and the continuing threat of death by cancer. Rennie's nightmare world is, therefore, something imposed upon her, and not really of her own making, as the front-parlour gossips would

[5] Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, p. 104.

suggest. While we are presented once again with an alienated and fragmented heroine, the fragmentation this time is literal. Parts of Rennie are, indeed, missing. She has a 'horror of someone, anyone putting a knife into her and cutting some of her off' (p. 23). She also dislikes the idea of being buried 'one piece at a time instead of all at once' (p. 23). Although Rennie feels 'betrayed' by the cancer, she stoically constructs a program for herself that includes 'schedules and goals'. Understandably, she is rather prone to 'bad dreams' in which she imagines she is 'full of white maggots eating away at [her] from the inside' (p. 83). Rennie's response is therefore, not so much a retreat into a fantasy world but more an attempt to elude reality through a series of escapes.

One of Atwood's main concerns in this novel is the politics involved in the relationship between women and men. According to Howells, 'It would seem that for most of the novel [Rennie] is caught like any traditional gothic heroine in a female victim fantasy where she sees all the men in her life as untrustworthy, threatening or sadistic.'[6] Victimisation begins early in Rennie's life when she is deserted by her father. She is angry with the father, not for leaving Griswold, which she understands, but for leaving her behind. The daughter's desire for rescue and the father's inability to carry it out, is the first in a series of betrayals.

Rennie's relationship with Jake is doomed to failure because it is an evasion of 'real' life. Jake is a designer and packager, and Rennie soon realises that 'she was one of the things Jake was packaging' (p. 104). Jake's specialty is choreographing their sexual encounters replete with black-lace nightgowns and hints of sado-masochistic behavior. Rennie deludes herself into thinking that 'A secure woman is not that threatened by her partner's

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[6] Howells, *Private and Fictional Words*, p. 61.

fantasies . . . As long as there is trust' (p. 106). She acquiesces in the role of victim by pretending that her passivity and powerlessness are just part of the game plan, although some of her comments to Jake suggest a slight apprehension on her part. She admonishes him, for example, with the comment, 'Sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper . . . For you to doodle on' (p. 105). But what begins as a *game* of powerlessness before the mastectomy, becomes a crippling reality, after. Jake finds her passive vulnerability unbearable; 'He needed to believe she was still closed, she could still fight, play, stand up to him' (p. 201). Like any gothic heroine, Rennie longs to be rescued by her lover but Jake is unable to rescue her. Rennie hides behind the false assumption that Jake moves out because she is dying, but it is her passive acquiescence that Jake finds unbearable. Rennie's self image is so bound up with the concept of the body beautiful that she projects her feelings of bodily disgust onto Jake and their relationship cannot withstand such a monstrous alteration.

After Jake's desertion, Rennie seeks solace from Daniel, the surgeon responsible for the mutilation, but her feelings towards him are ambiguous. She is both attracted and repelled by him. She falls in love with him because 'he knows something about her she doesn't know, he knows what she's like inside' (pp. 80-81). Like his other patients, she's been 'resurrected' by him, and 'he knows we're not all that well glued together, any minute we'll vaporize' (p. 143). Rennie's inevitable attraction towards Daniel is foreshadowed in childhood memories of the grandfather — another mutilator of women who 'drove . . . through blizzards to tear babies out through holes he cut in women's stomachs and then sewed up again' (p. 55). (Childbirth is a scene of gothic horror for Atwood, part of the victimisation of the female).

By faking suicide, Rennie entices Daniel over to her flat and then seduces him. Unfortunately, Rennie's belief in Daniel's restorative touch is shattered by the realisation that 'he needed something from her' (p. 238), and she begins to understand what 'terminal' means.

To escape once more, Rennie picks a remote Caribbean island, somewhere 'off the beaten track'. Falsely, she assumes that anonymity will provide the protection that Jake and Daniel are unable to give. She comments that 'The difference between this and home isn't so much that she knows nobody as that nobody knows her. In a way she's invisible. In a way she's safe' (p. 39).

The island setting is not one we would traditionally think of as an appropriate gothic setting, with its brilliant sunlight, white sand and blue skies, but things are not what they seem. In the novel, the haunted castle is replaced by the ironically named Fort Industry, but it is every bit as sinister. Historically, the fort is the island's main attraction but it has been transformed into a prison and allowed to deteriorate so that even outside it smells 'of bodies, of latrines and lime and decaying food' (p. 125). Later in the novel, Rennie is incarcerated in the prison and experiences the full horror of the place. But it is not only the main attraction which isn't quite what it seems. The island, like Griswold, is only superficially idyllic. A closer look reveals the disparity between the 'sparkling iridescent sand' beaches of the tourist brochure and the 'narrow', gravelly' beach 'dotted with lumps of coagulated oil' (p. 79); it also reveals an undercurrent of violence which permeates the novel.

While on the island, Rennie is indeed rescued by a man. She describes Paul, a chance encounter, as 'a faceless stranger' (p. 99) and because of his ghostly presence, he seems at first the perfect rescuer. He lives in a house

which is 'neat, almost blank as if no one is actually living in it' (p. 202). Although Rennie snoops through his few possessions trying 'to find something that will make [him] real for her' (p. 219), he makes the perfect lover because he is not totally real. Paul and Rennie mirror each other. Both aim for a 'deliberate neutrality', crave anonymity, and are interested in a relationship without emotional commitment. Although she is afraid of failure, Rennie is willing to take the risk simply because 'nothing can touch her. She's a tourist. She's exempt.' (p. 203) Fortunately for Rennie, Paul's touch magically breaks through the 'barrier of deadened flesh' (p. 21). Later, she acknowledges her indebtedness to him with the comment: 'She owes him something: he was the one who gave her back her body, wasn't he?' (p. 248). But the lack of commitment continues. Aware that she has become involved in a 'no-hooks, no-strings vacation romance with a mysterious stranger' (p. 222), Rennie knows this time what she wants: 'Love is tangled, sex is straight' (p. 223). So the relationship with Paul is just another form of evasion on Rennie's part.

Even Paul's rescue is not all it seems. Through Paul, and against her will, Rennie becomes involved in a political uprising. She meets Dr. Minnow, one of the few honest politicians on the island. Dr. Minnow warns Rennie about getting involved but he too wants something from her. He exhorts her to 'Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter. Since you are a reporter, it is your duty to report' (p. 134), but Rennie continues to hide behind the wall of innocence by telling him that she's not that kind of a reporter and finds herself eventually in jail for her involvement. Once again she is alone and exposed and Paul's rescue is a delusion. But even in prison she continues to believe that someone will

eventually rescue her 'If she can only keep believing it, then it will happen' (p. 280).

While Rennie's litany of betrayal links her with the traditional gothic heroine, she, like the narrator of *Surfacing*, helps to create the situations herself, by becoming involved in relationships in which an emotional commitment can be avoided. She has not lost the ability to feel, as the narrator of *Surfacing* has done; rather, she is bent on avoiding feeling. Being 'in love' makes you 'visible, soft penetrable; it [makes] you ludicrous' (p. 102). Jake and Rennie live together but agree to 'keep their options open' (p. 104). She can take the risk and fall in love with Daniel since he is already married. Although she is embarrassed at the prospect of a holiday romance with Paul, it is acceptable 'as long as she doesn't fall in love' (p. 223). Love and commitment threaten Rennie's mantle of invisibility. The dread of exposure prevents Rennie from becoming involved with anything or anyone. An emotional response is seen as a loss of control and a loss of invisibility. It would move her from the margins to the middle of experience. Rennie's attitude towards sex is just another example of her attempts to avoid any emotional entanglement but also suggests the more basic fear of sexual assault.

Other examples of female dread permeate the novel. The title itself suggests the fear and anxiety surrounding the female body, and after the operation, Rennie imagines the body as a 'sinister twin, taking its revenge for whatever crimes the mind was supposed to have committed on it' (p. 82). She has nightmares about the scar on her breast splitting open 'like a diseased fruit' but Rennie's sense of outrage at the body's 'betrayal' is understandable since it is the normal consequence of undergoing such a mutilating operation.

While it is possible for the reader to identify with these fears, they suggest a heroine who is creating her own paranoid world.

Another aspect of female gothic is the fear of enclosure. Whereas the claustrophobic atmosphere of *Surfacing* is created by the disembodied voice of the narrator, in *Bodily Harm* the heroine is literally incarcerated. Rennie's fear of enclosure begins as a child when she is locked up in the cellar as a form of punishment. Her final incarceration in a prison cell is the result of her being female and powerless. Imprisonment in a cellar acts like a framing device around Rennie's life. Being shut up in a cellar is one of the first things, and will possibly be the last thing, she remembers. When she is incarcerated in the island prison, 'Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever' (p. 290). The framing device is Atwood's way of suggesting that what underpins the supposedly civilised world in Griswold is the barbarity that Rennie finds in the exotic but less civilised island.

However, an even more sinister image haunts the novel in the form of the 'faceless stranger' with a 'length of rope'. In a novel that is so literal, the figure is imaginatively important as a means by which Atwood explores the psychological dimensions of female fears. Once again, however, the image has its basis in reality. Some would-be rapist had entered her apartment. The situation is made even more sinister when the policeman informs Rennie that the man was not a burglar because 'He made himself a cup of Ovaltine. He was just waiting for you, I guess' (p. 13). The man with the rope appears only after Jake has moved out, which leads Rennie to wonder 'Maybe the man with the rope hadn't so much broken into her apartment as been sucked in by the force of gravity' (p. 39). Like many victims, she begins to feel implicated in the crime, although she has done nothing: 'She has been seen,

too intimately, her face blurred and distorted, damaged, owned in some way she couldn't define' (p. 40). At one time she would have turned the man into an amusing anecdote, but she worries now about being thought a man-hater. Rennie psycho-analyses herself and decides that she is projecting her own fear of death onto some stranger. Again, Rennie tries to dispel the threat by trivialising the situation into the game of 'Clue', 'Mr. X, in the bedroom, with a rope'. Rennie sees the rope as a message and wonders what would happen if she pulled on it. 'What would come up? What was at the end, *the end*? A hand, then an arm, a shoulder, and finally a face. At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger' (p. 41). The 'faceless stranger' continues to haunt Rennie even when she is incarcerated in the island prison and witnesses the horrendous consequences of political repression. Her perception of a link between the man with the rope and the police in the courtyard of the prison is described by Howells as 'one of those moments of uncanny insight so characteristic of gothic heroines:'[7]

> She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything.'(p. 290)

Through the figure of the 'faceless stranger', Atwood is able to explore the ever-present fear of death and the complexities of the female psyche in terms of the complexities of the modern world.

The one characteristic Rennie, more that any other Atwood heroine, shares with the traditional gothic heroine is pathological naivety — a form of

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[7] Howells, p. 60.

innocence that the reader may have difficulty accepting in someone as worldly as Rennie. Whereas the traditional gothic heroine is overcome by emotion and stunned into inertia, Rennie's self-proclaimed innocence prevents her from assessing situations correctly. She runs away from a harmless beggar and then allows herself to be duped by Lora, a somewhat disreputable island resident, with the most implausible of stories. But even more foolishly, she continues to participate in what she knows to be a fabrication, by convincing herself that '[the] less she admits to knowing the better' (p. 176). As readers, we are astounded at Rennie's inability to protect herself. Rennie's naivety is a form of submissiveness which is a prominent personality trait of the persecuted gothic heroine as she appears in novels well into the Nineteenth Century. Her false assumption that as a tourist she is exempt from involvement, prevents her from dealing realistically with a politically explosive situation. And yet Rennie's 'innocence' is a paradox for while she is the most genuinely victimised heroine, she actively participates in the illusion of innocence. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Rennie cannot believe that she is somehow implicated.

Whereas the traditional gothic heroine is morally flawless, Atwood's heroines, in general, are not, and she dramatically exposes the falsehood of women's protestation of innocent victimisation. Paul does not profess innocence nor does he deny moral responsibility but he sees the issue of political victimisation in very simple terms: 'There's only people with power and people without power. Sometimes they change places.' (p.240). And because he eats well, he assumes he has power. Rennie assumes she has none. But she is forced to come to terms with the falsity of her assumption. There may be no malicious intention in her position of moral detachment; it

may spring purely from self-preservation. But in prison, Atwood brings her out of it, to the point of bearing witness.

While it can be argued that the traditional Gothic explored real emotional tension and moral dilemmas, it did so by incorporating them within the fabulous.[8] Atwood's intention is somewhat different. The blurring of fantasy and reality is not evident in this novel. Atwood's use of a self-enclosed world is not an attempt to evade the question of moral responsibility, but a means by which it may be confronted. While the original Gothic raised social and moral issues but disguised them within the realm of fantasy, Atwood makes her heroine confront the real issues of political torture and repression. Rennie, unlike Joan Foster, does not enter a fictional world where her fears are rendered harmless. What the 'sweet Canadians' deem unnatural, happens to be the political reality under which many 'innocent' people live and die.

Coral Ann Howells has said that gothic techniques are essentially visual in their emphasis on dramatic gestures, giving the reader an experience comparable to that of a spectator at the theatre,[9] and throughout this narrative, Atwood constantly exhorts the reader 'to see', often using visual effects in a dramatic fashion. There is one particularly gruesome example. A month before the operation, Rennie is asked to write an article on pornography. In the exhibit the 'grand finale' is a photograph of a rat emerging from a vagina. At the sight of this Rennie is physically sick. Rennie suddenly realises that 'a large gap had appeared in what she's been used to thinking of as reality' (p. 210). Later, in prison, she makes a connection between the 'raw material' of the pornography exhibit and the

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[8] Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery*, p. 7.

[9] Howells, p. 16

violent reality she is now witnessing, such as the brutal beating of a fellow inmate. It is, Rennie realises, 'indecent, it's not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, not rats in the vagina, but only because they haven't thought of it yet, they're still amateurs' (p. 290). The gruesome spectacle dramatically transforms Rennie's concept of reality. Her fears and anxieties are not the product of an overheated imagination and therefore likely to disappear, as when she viewed the pornography, but are the result of a politically explosive situation in which no one stops to inquire whether or not she is an innocent tourist and therefore exempt. Whereas the image of the aborted foetus in *Surfacing* is a distortion, the product of the narrator's heightened imagination, there is an increased sense of reality in *Bodily Harm.* The man with the rope is not a figment of Rennie's imagination. The horrors that Rennie experiences cannot be explained away for they are the horrors of an intolerable but real situation. Even a descent into madness would no doubt be a welcome relief but unfortunately for Atwood's heroine, there is no such rescue. Atwood manoeuvres the heroine into an untenable position where 'She doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes' (p.293). Through such imagery, Atwood forces her readers to see beneath the surface and confront the reality of unmitigated violence.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the prison experience for Rennie is that, unable any longer to avoid reality, she comes to an awareness of world obligation. Although haunted by the past, she has severed the relationship with her father and conceals everything from her disapproving mother. While Rennie seems to have rejected the past more than the other heroines, her developing relationship with Lora illustrates her progress towards involvement. At first Rennie callously rejects Lora as an unsuitable

companion and thinks of her as someone who could definitely be improved. Rennie 'packages' Lora in much the same way that she herself was packaged by Jake. She finds Lora vulgar and loathsome and is appalled at an openness which is in marked contrast to her own reserve. But quite possibly, she dislikes Lora because Rennie sees herself reflected in the other's eyes. Atwood uses the same imagery to describe both women. Because of her own 'nibbled flesh', Rennie is initially repelled by the sight of Lora's gnawed hands with their 'nibbled' raw skin because 'She doesn't like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred like that' (p. 86). Lora's hands threaten Rennie's boundaries, and the marred fingers are another sign of harm. However, she unwittingly becomes involved with Lora when she agrees to pick up the mysterious package and deliver it to Ste Agathe. When the two are incarcerated in the island prison, Rennie begins to understand Lora's victimisation in terms of her own. Whereas the narrator in *Surfacing* rather self-righteously rejects Anna, Rennie learns to value Lora. The appalling circumstances under which the two women are imprisoned enable Rennie to realise that Lora is more noble in her acts of prostitution than she herself is with her intact, self-righteous virtue. After Lora is beaten unconscious, Rennie cradles her bruised and bloodied head in her lap and wills her back to life:

> She's holding Lora's left hand, between both of her own, perfectly still, nothing is moving, and yet she knows she if pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there's an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through, she's gritting her teeth with the effort, she can hear herself, a moaning, it must be her own voice, this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done. (p. 299)

In the scene with Lora, Rennie is transformed from observer to committed participant as she makes the 'one truly generous gesture of her life.'[10]

Although physically revolted by contact, Rennie's belief that she may be able to will Lora back to life through the 'magic touch' of hands, marks a point at which she has given up the delusion of powerlessness.

The novel is about bearing witness, but it is a responsibility that, at first, Rennie refuses. Only when Dr. Minnow is assassinated does Rennie acknowledge her responsibility: 'Now she knows why he wanted her to write about this place: so there would be less chance of this happening, to him' (p. 251). Dr. Minnow's plea is echoed later by Lora, when she implores Rennie to 'Tell someone I'm here . . . Tell someone what happened' (p. 282). Having failed to protect Dr. Minnow, Rennie commits herself to bearing witness for Lora. Although Rennie has proclaimed her innocence throughout the novel, she finds the strength and determination to overcome her disabling passivity. Unlike the traditional gothic heroine, she does not succumb to the horrors of her situation, nor wait to be rescued, but instead opts for life rather than death. Paradoxically, however, this involves confronting the reality of her death — not in the symbolic way of the narrator in *Surfacing* or the mock death of Joan in *Lady Oracle,* but in facing the terror of her own disintegration: 'She may be dying, true, but if so she's doing it slowly, relatively speaking. Other people are doing it faster: at night there are screams' (p. 284). Rennie's confrontation with death is responsible for her transformation from a rather passive victim into a resilient heroine.

The dreadful irony, of course, is that Rennie may never have the chance to enact her new story about not being a victim, for the ending of the novel is another example of Atwood's characteristic ambiguity. Although the novel begins with 'This is how I got here' (p. 11), the 'here' seems to be the prison

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[10] Howells, *Private and Fictional Words*, p. 60.

and therefore *Bodily Harm* is the novel Rennie will write, if and when she gets out. However, towards the end of the narrative there is a shift into the future with the line: 'This is what will happen.' (p. 293). Commenting on the change in tense, Howells suggests that

> The rest of Rennie's story of her release and return to Toronto . . . is fantasy, signalled in the text by the flickering of verb tenses between past, present and future. In this 'massive involvement' situation only through fantasy can Rennie distance herself from her intolerable position.[11]

What actually happens to Rennie is left unresolved. But one thing is certain; there will be no advantageous marriage and a restoration of tranquility for this heroine. However ambiguous the ending, Rennie's moral awareness is evident in her determination to report and bear witness. If she gets out of prison, she will become a subversive. 'She will pick her time; then she will report' (p. 301). Although the ending creates a sense of mystery and intrigue, the narrative distortion so evident in *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle,* is not present. Rennie is too honest to deceive the reader. Even Paul tells her, 'For one thing you're nice, . . . You'd rather not be, you'd rather be something else, tough or sharp or something like that, but you're nice, you can't help it' (p. 150). Rennie might not survive physically but psychologically she has overcome the debilitating isolation and fragmentation so evident at the beginning of her story.

In *Bodily Harm,* Atwood creates a modern gothic situation whereby the fears and anxieties surrounding the female experience are concretised (echoing Moers' comments on physiological fear as characteristic of the female gothic) and yet paradoxically, have become situated within the broader social and political context of the contemporary world.

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[11] Howells, p. 60.

Chapter 5

The Handmaid's Tale

> Outside, the plague bulges, slops over, flows down the streets and so we stay here, holding on and holding on, to the one small thing which is not yet withering, not yet marked for death, this armful of words, together, with. This is as good as it gets, nothing can be better and so there's nothing to hope for, but I do it anyway. In the distance, beyond the war in the midground, there's a river, and some willows, in sunlight, and some hills.[1]

While grounded firmly in current reality — both women's reality and political reality — *Bodily Harm* has a sharper element of allegory than the novels that come before it. Rennie's bodily harm is literal, as is her incarceration, but the impression builds of Rennie's experiences as an allegory of oppression in our world — and not just of female oppression. Looking at the three novels discussed chronologically, we see an expansion of perspective to embrace more general social concerns. This goes hand in hand with an expansion and enrichment of the gothic melodies in the stories.

The Handmaid's Tale is emphatically allegorical. Like Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood turns to the future to say something about the present. But unlike Lessing, she allows us a degree of optimism. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood turns the early years of the third millennium into a world of nightmare where all the oppressive and restrictive issues of the past are revisited on women in an imaginary future society. She constructs a subversive critique not only of the patriarchal social order but of society as a

[1] Margaret Atwood, 'Hopeless', in *Murder in the Dark* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983), p. 57.

whole by once again employing the conventions of the gothic (a closed world, a persecuted heroine, an evil step-mother, a villainous step-father, and a heroic rescuer). But Atwood's ironic inversion of the gothic paradigm in *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates a more confident version of the future than the other three novels.

The Handmaid's Tale portrays a totalitarian police state, the Republic of Gilead (formerly the United States of America), seen through the eyes of the female protagonist. Sometime after the catastrophe in which the President is shot and the Congress machine-gunned, the constitution is suspended and an authoritarian regime is installed which preaches 'a return to traditional values' and Christian fundamentalism. Drastic measures are necessary to halt the declining birth rate, therefore fertile women are 'recruited' for reproductive purposes. The government is able to create a source of handmaids by declaring all second marriages and non-marital liaisons illegal. These women are coerced into induction centers where they are brainwashed into subservience and then sent out to different households of high-ranking government officials to be impregnated. The handmaids risk being declared 'unwomen' and sent to the colonies if they fail to conceive. Reproduction is their only function and means of salvation.

In the novel, Margaret Atwood employs a number of characteristic gothic conventions. A favorite ploy in early Gothics was the rediscovered manuscript, and in examples such as *The Castle of Otranto* it produces 'an indirect, mediated narrative that imparts an air of strangeness to the exotic setting' and a sense that the reader is 'about to delve into a world that will be difficult to understand'.[2] In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we are told by the

[2] MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, p. 10.

narrator that her story is a 'reconstruction', but we discover in the 'Historical Notes' that what we have just finished reading is not in fact the handmaid's tale but a further reconstruction of her tale. Cassettes from the Gileadean era have been discovered and two university professors have painstakingly transcribed and arranged the 'blocks of speech'. They admit that 'all such arrangements are based on guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research.' and, in characteristic fashion, they have a little whinge because the narrator's unreliability has made their task more difficult. They would have preferred someone with the 'instincts of a reporter or spy' or the foresight to include 'twenty pages or so of printout from a private computer'.[3] The so-called manuscript is the handmaid's oral reconstruction which has been transcribed, annotated and published by the two professors (no doubt staking their academic careers on such findings). By using such a convention, Atwood creates the sense of a closed world which is mysterious and strange, but she also modifies the convention.

At one point in the narrative, the handmaid is reminded of something Aunt Lydia, the female custodian, has said: 'Ordinary . . . is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary' (p. 43). But it is the juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary which is so inherently disquieting to the reader. Nothing in Gilead is beyond the realm of probability, given the circumstances which exist today. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood transforms the gothic castle into an elegant two-story Victorian brick house complete with white picket fence, but the gracious exterior belies the sinister intent of a household where the handmaid is imprisoned in an upstairs bedroom under the watchful eyes of the

[3] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), p. 322. Future references to this edition will appear in the text.

witch-like Serena Joy.

Margaret Atwood gives a convincing portrayal of the nightmare world of both literal and figurative confinement. The imagery of enclosure is responsible for much of the sense of horror in the novel and nothing reinforces the handmaid's isolation more that the costume she is forced to wear. Designed like a nun's habit, but 'the colour of blood', the costume encloses and supposedly protects the handmaid. It comes complete with flat red shoes and red gloves. The white wings around the face keep the handmaid from seeing and from being seen. The costume, by restricting vision, reflects the enclosed and limited perspective that the handmaid is forced to endure. When Offred glances in the hall mirror, instead of herself she sees 'a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood' (p. 19). The distorted reflection emphasises the alienation from one's self. In a poem, Atwood writes: 'To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live / without mirrors is to live without the self'.[4] Atwood manages to portray even the physical separation from one's own body. When Offred takes a bath her nakedness is 'strange'; her body seems 'outdated'. She does not like looking at 'something that determines [her] so completely' (p. 73). She remembers thinking of her body as an 'implement of [her will], something, in other words, under her control, but all that has changed.

Enclosed in a world of silence, the handmaid resembles a member of some fanatical religious order, forced into self-contemplation. For much of the novel, Offred sits alone in an upstairs bedroom trying to get used to 'the

[4] Margaret Atwood, *Two Headed Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 49.

long parentheses of nothing' (p. 79). Not only is the handmaid shut up within the house but there are few opportunities for contact between herself and the other staff. Offred longs to have a gossip with someone, even the Marthas, the female domestics, since they know all sorts of 'unofficial news' but they are not supposed to 'fraternise' with the handmaids. It is not only isolation, but the barely concealed hostility, she must endure. Offred would like to turn the Commander's wife, to whose household she has been assigned as handmaid, into 'an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect [her]' (p. 26), but Serena Joy makes it very clear from the beginning that she wants to see Offred as little as possible. The presence of the handmaid is an everlasting reminder to Serena Joy that she has not fulfilled her biological function; she is sterile and therefore to be despised.

Atwood's many references to the fictional nature of the story invite the reader to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the handmaid's tale, but the ambiguity is not an attempt to deceive. At one point the heroine says:

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.
>
> If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending to the story and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.
>
> It isn't a story I'm telling. (p. 49)

By agonising over the difficulties of telling the story, the handmaid draws attention to the act of writing and therefore dramatises the creative process. Unlike Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, however, this heroine is not duplicitous. She is expressing the inherent difficulties of telling the story truthfully by acknowledging both the process of fictionalising and the fact that she is telling her story to someone.

> Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. (p. 49)

Her desire to fictionalise her life and tell her story to someone is an attempt to relieve an almost unbearable situation, whereas Joan Foster's reasons are much more suspect since they are an attempt to deceive everyone, including herself. Offred is much more honest in her attempt to tell the truth, even while acknowledging the difficulty of doing so:

> It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; . . . (p. 144).

Inherent in the first-person narrative technique, of course, is the problem of limited focus — that all is seen through the narrator's eyes, but Offred appears to be a reliable narrator. Any uncertainty comes from the sense of incompleteness of her narrative.

The cloud of uncertainty that hangs about Offred's tale is echoed in the atmosphere of the novel. The handmaid, in describing the central part of town where the suburbs are so tidy, is reminded of 'the beautiful pictures they used to print in the magazines about homes and gardens and interior decoration' (p. 33). The continuing absence of people bestows an air of enchantment on the place and the ominous nature of the dream is reinforced by the many references to the tolling bells which punctuate the narrative. The handmaid reminds us that 'Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries' (p. 18). The bells emphasise the regimentation of life, but their ominous quality comes from their reminder of the passing of time, their connection with death.

Dreams are another device which show the effect of isolation on the

mind. There is a dream-like uncertainty within *The Handmaid's Tale* because, as a witness, Offred cannot believe what is going on around her. She goes to sleep every night thinking that in the morning she will wake up in her own house and things will be back the way they were' (p. 209). She would like to convince herself that what she is experiencing is only a 'paranoid delusion' and that sooner or later she will wake up. The real horror of the situation arises because she cannot wake herself from the gradually intensifying nightmare. According to Elizabeth MacAndrew, 'The dream-like uncertainty may be an uncertainty of perception in the character but if it is, the reader is forced to share it'.[5]

Perhaps the most ominous thing of all in the novel is the handmaid's emotional detachment. Her description of the bodies hanging from hooks on the infamous Wall, for example, has an air of chilling objectivity about it:

> It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men look like dolls on which faces have not yet been painted; like scare-crows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough. It's the obvious heaviness of the heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there's no life any more to hold them up. The heads are zeros.
>
> Though if you look and look, as we are doing, you can see the outlines of the features under the white cloth, like grey shadows. The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting (p. 42).

Although there is a strong element of fantasy in this description, it is both objective (detached would perhaps be a better word) and highly imaginative. The bodies, which are supposed to inspire hatred and scorn, inspire only 'blankness' and the feeling that she must not feel. Although the heroine's adoption of a somewhat detached stance dislocates full emotional involvement, it is not the debilitating lack of involvement depicted in

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[5] MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, p. 193.

Surfacing. Amin Malak comments:

> [The] heroine [is initially presented] as a voice, almost like a sleepwalker conceiving disjointed perceptions of its surroundings, as well as flashing reminiscences about a bygone life. As the scenes gather more details, the heroine's voice is steadily and imperceptively, yet convincingly, transfigured into a full-roundedness, that parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her.[6]

In keeping with this air of detachment she tells us very little about herself until half-way through her story. The 'full-roundedness' of her voice, then, comes with the revelation of identity. After the handmaid's illegal and furtive visit to the Commander's office, she returns to her room and attempts to put things into perspective: 'But something has changed, now, tonight. Circumstances have altered. I can ask for something. Possibly not much; but something' (p. 153). As if to emphasise the altered circumstances, Atwood provides the reader with personal details of the handmaid, including her present name. In doing so, Atwood signals the heroine's transformation from a disembodied voice into a more fully realised character.

One of the most sinister aspects of the novel is the grotesque inversion of feminism displayed by the 'Aunts', a group of older women who run the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre and who exercise tyrannical power over the handmaids. Looking much like a female militia in their khaki-coloured uniforms, complete with cattle prods and whistles clipped to their belts, they indoctrinate the handmaids into the new way of life using a combination of religious platitude and physical abuse. Aunt Lydia, in particular, harangues the handmaids with anti-feminist ideals such as: 'Modesty is invisibility, . . . Never forget it. To be seen - to be *seen* - is to be - her voice trembled -

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[6] Amin Malak, 'Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition', *Canadian Literature*, No. 112 (1987), pp. 13-14.

penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable' (p. 39). The Aunts are the female equivalent of the secret police and have absolute power within their rigidly defined female world. We learn in the 'Historical Notes' that there is apparently nothing original in using organisations such as the 'Aunts' as a means of control:

> For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. (p. 320)

One interesting feature of the narrative, as Amin Malak points out, is the fact that 'we witness very few of the male characters acting with stark cruelty: the narrative reports most of the violent acts after the fact, sparing the reader gory scenes,'[7] whereas the Aunts are responsible for the regime's most gruesome spectacles: the female Salvagings and the Particicution. And in characteristic fashion of tyrants who impose sanctions on others, they are heavily involved in suspect activities: they are in charge of a nightclub which promotes illegal but state-sanctioned prostitution. It is evident that the Aunts, since they condone the regime's corruption and moral decay, represent the worst aspects of the totalitarian society. The Aunts are an interesting development in Atwood's fiction, for what they illustrate is the potential totalitarianism within feminism.

While the Aunts illustrate one type of complicity in women's victimisation, the radical feminists of the seventies, represented by Offred's mother, come in for some criticism since they were the ones who initiated the original book burnings which eventually led to the universal censorship which characterises Gilead.[8] Offred recalls her mother's participation in an anti-

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[7] Malak, p. 12.

[8] Barbara Hill Rigney refers to the book burning demonstration as 'a kind of witches sabbath, a midnight ceremony of destruction in the name of anti-pornography' in *Margaret Atwood* (London: MacMillan Education, 1987), p. 119.

pornography demonstration. In the light of the burning books, '[their] faces were happy, ecstatic almost. Fire can do that' (p. 48). A 'woman's culture', elements of which dominate in Gilead, can be as dangerous, Atwood suggests, as any rigidly enforced political system.

Once again, in this novel, Atwood explores the issue of childbirth, but missing from this account are the gruesome details so evident in *Surfacing* and elsewhere. Nonetheless, there is something monstrously inhumane and yet grotesquely comic in the depiction of childbirth, even here. Paradoxically, images of sterility (in the emphasis upon clean, pure whiteness) dominate the regime's birthing ceremony:

> The Commander's Wife hurries in, in her ridiculous white cotton nightgown, her spindly legs sticking out beneath it. Two of the Wives in their blue dresses and veils hold her by the arms, as if she needs it; she has a tight little smile on her face, like a hostess at a party she's rather not be giving. She must know what we think of her. She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair. Oddly enough, she's wearing white cotton socks, and bedroom slippers, blue ones made of fuzzy material, like toilet-seat covers. But we pay no attention to the Wife, we hardly even see her, our eyes are on Janine. In the dim light, in her white gown, she glows like a moon in cloud. (p. 135)

After the birth, the Wife is helped off the Stool and the baby is 'placed ceremoniously in her arms' while in the background, still suffering the pains of afterbirth, Janine cries 'helplessly, burnt-out miserable tears' (p. 136). Her role over, she is abandoned to her misery. Atwood's presentation of this hag-ridden scene (complete with the sinister Aunt Elizabeth as midwife) emphasises the futility and lack of unity among the women. As in the distant past, childbirth is again under the control of woman; and men, even doctors, are excluded. The gathering together of the Wives and Handmaids under the watchful eyes of Aunt Elizabeth enables Offred to draw a parallel between

their activities and the former activities of her mother. She remembers with embarrassment her mother's rowdy participation in the pornography and abortion protests and the women's culture which was being advocated. When the birthing ceremony is over and emotional exhaustion has set in, Offred wonders: 'Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies' (p. 137). Offred's comment is not a condemnation but more a statement of fact, and possibly an uncanny realisation that the past is repeating itself.

Atwood once again discusses women's complicity in victimisation. Offred's description of her former life suggests that she was a typically uninvolved woman deceiving herself into believing that lack of involvement is a form of protection. She also remembers trusting fate and taking too much for granted. She lived by ignoring the unpleasant things that were going on around her: 'We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories' (pp. 66-67). After the army takes over and declares a state of emergency a few people march in protest, but not as many as might be expected. Offred does not voice her opposition because she has to think about her family. She remembers the incident with the cat as another example of her lack of responsibility. When her husband is planning their escape and something has to be done about the cat, she refuses to accept the responsibility but neither will she discuss what has to be done. With hindsight she realises that he had to carry the burden of guilt by himself. In a sense, Offred represents an entire society's protestation of innocence as a reason for its lack of involvement which, in Atwood's view, is morally

reprehensible. The ultimate price paid is the loss of personal freedom.

Notwithstanding the fact that Atwood presents a rather bleak vision of the future, the novel is not depressing. The resilience of the narrator prevents it from becoming a catalogue of despair. In fact, what comes across most strongly is the subversive element. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie's confrontation with death transforms her into a subversive, whereas Offred becomes a subversive in order to survive. Although Offred maintains a facade of obedience and piety, she is not a true believer. She thinks that by becoming a handmaid she has improved her chances of staying alive and finally being able to escape. Her acts of defiance, such as allowing the young Guardian to catch a glimpse of her face, are 'so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards [she holds] out for herself like candy [she] hoarded, as a child, at the back of a drawer. Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes' (p. 31). Offred realises there is something wonderfully subversive in whispering obscenities about those in power, particularly the Aunts. 'There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It's like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with' (p. 234). There is also something subversive and defiant in Offred's description of the Commander's attempts to impregnate her. Although a man of great power and influence, somehow with his pants down he is a parody of strength as he 'fucks, with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping' (p. 105). Much later, when he takes her to Jezebel's, the state-sanctioned nightclub, she realises once again that '[w]ithout his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried' (p.267). Instead of superiority and power, he represents 'futility and bathos'.

Even Offred's faith is subversive. While every attempt has been made

to badger the handmaids into submission, Offred never stops believing that some day the tyranny will end. But her conviction is not a debilitating self-deception. For example, when she is explaining what might have happened to her husband, she knows that there are three possibilities. He may be dead, he may have been captured or he may have escaped and will someday send a message. Offred recognises the inconsistency of these beliefs:

> The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it. (p. 116)

In acknowledging the contradictions, Offred exposes herself to a psychological reality that Atwood's other heroines were unable to accept. Wishful-thinking enables Offred to confront reality rather than escape it.

Although enclosed in a world of silence, the handmaids develop a secret language, thus illustrating that dissent is still possible. Since only orthodox greetings are allowed, the women learn to communicate on a non-verbal level using gestures, glances and sign language. Although few, the handmaids avail themselves of every opportunity to communicate. At the indoctrination centre, one of the first lessons is learning how to whisper 'almost without sound' while the Aunts patrol the corridors. Another example of this type of secret message takes place during the 'Women's Salvagings'— a ceremony designed by the regime to rid itself of dissidents. Once again '[the] crimes of others are a secret language' among the handmaids. 'Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all' (p. 287). In such a restrictive environment, every action communicates something. Moira's open defiance and audacious escape from the centre is a secret message: 'In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power

had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked' (p. 143).

While Moira's open defiance might appeal to the reader for the same reason that it appeals to Offred, she sacrifices the future for the sake of the present, something Offred is not willing to do. While managing to escape from the centre, Moira is caught and ends up at Jezebel's as a prostitute. When discussing the advantages of prostitution with Offred, Moira reckons she 'should figure out some way of getting in here. You'd have thee or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights' (p. 261), but Offred is frightened by her indifference. Offred's faith in a future suggests a determination to survive which is more heroic than Moira's open defiance of the system.

Like the traditional gothic heroine, Offred is persecuted, deprived of power, and imprisoned but as Jane Spencer argues 'the places which confine [women] often protect them too'.[9] Much like the gothic castle, Offred's upstairs bedroom acts as a sanctuary from the horrors going on outside. In the chapters entitled 'Night' (seven in all), Offred's mind is set free in her sanctuary. As she says 'The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet' (p. 47). In these sections, Atwood focuses on the heroine's mind and the inherent freedom of the imagination. Much like Emily St Aubert, in Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Offred seeks solace in the world outside her prison window. Emily, having spent much of her time imprisoned in the gloomy castle, relieves her mind by contemplating the splendours of nature outside the window. Offred has a similar experience as

[9] Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 194.

she looks out her window:

> The sky is clear but hard to make out, because of the searchlight; but yes, in the obscured sky a moon does float, newly, a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink. The moon is stone and the sky is full of deadly hardware, but oh God, how beautiful anyway. (p. 108)

While it is true that Offred's contemplation of natural beauty might be somewhat hampered by the searchlight and the hardware in the sky, there is something subversive in her delight. Much like the traditional Gothic heroine, Offred is sustained by her affinity with nature during her imprisonment, since Nature itself, she believes is subversive: 'There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently' (p. 161). Offred associates herself spiritually with the buried and silenced Nature which cannot be eradicated.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood examines the resilience of the human spirit when subjected to political tyranny. Offred is the most ordinary and yet the most determined of Atwood's heroines but it is the strength of her emotional commitment which eventually saves her. Although the regime attempts to obliterate the past, Offred rediscovers the emotional links which bind her to her own past by summoning up images of her mother. We are shown how liberated mothers of the 1970s raised their daughters. Offred's mother, single, lonely and against the advice of her more 'liberated' friends, decides to have a baby. Unfortunately the mother sees the daughter's desire to grow up, marry and then have a child as a 'backlash' but at the same time feels that 'History will absolve [her]' (p. 131). Although the relationship between Offred and her mother is a difficult one, it is not destructive. As Offred explains:

> She expected too much from me . . . she expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once. (p. 132)

What comes across so poignantly is Offred's forgiveness. 'But despite everything, we didn't do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this' (p. 190).

An even greater display of female bonding occurs at the end of the novel when Ofglen commits suicide rather than betraying the underground network and Offred's knowledge of it and in doing so saves Offred from almost certain death. Offred poignantly acknowledges that Ofglen has 'died that [she] may live' (p. 298).

But it is the strength of the emotional bond between Offred and Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, that best illustrates her resolve. At one point in the narrative, Offred acknowledges that 'It's lack of love we die from' (p. 113). Sometimes she cannot believe the emotional commitment between herself and Nick and her comment that 'Such seriousness, about a man . . . had not seemed possible to [her] before' (p. 283), illustrates this. Unlike Atwood's other heroines who have difficulty making an emotional commitment to anyone, Offred is willing to sacrifice all for Nick. Love transforms Offred into a resourceful, brave and committed subversive which is a far cry from the commitment made by the narrator in *Surfacing* when her boyfriend suggests that they should live together and she admits that 'It wasn't even a real decision, it was more like buying a goldfish or a potted cactus plant, not because you want one in advance but because you happen to be in the store and you see them lined up on the counter' (p. 42).

While Offred's exact fate is uncertain, she is indeed heroically rescued by her lover, Nick. Offred's tale ends with 'And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light' (p. 307). Although the last line of the handmaid's tale sounds like a further example of Atwood's characteristic ambiguous ending, this heroine manages to escape the gothic world in which she has been imprisoned.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

> What you think is pessimistic depends very largely on what you believe is out there in the world.[1]

While the preponderance of gothic imagery in Margaret Atwood's fiction reflects her literary background in the conventions of gothic romance, it is the adaptation and transformation of the Gothic which enables her to render in fiction the facts of contemporary female experience. Atwood uses gothic conventions ironically in order to construct a modern version of the gothic. While her heroines exemplify the victimisation and passivity of characters who structure their lives along the lines of gothic romance and then are trapped in the negative image of the victim, what we see in the four novels is an increasing attempt to overcome the restrictions of the characters' lives and the roles they have imposed on themselves.

The principal gothic themes reworked by Atwood are the mother/daughter relationship and female victimisation. Both are important components of the female gothic experience. In her fiction, Atwood concentrates on the 'rediscovered mother' aspect of the maternal theme. Her heroines do not have what could be described as an open and honest relationship with their mothers. Although the open hostility between Joan and her mother in *Lady Oracle* is replaced in the other novels by a more subtle form of antagonism, there remains an undercurrent of resentment. There is a sense that the daughters are unable to confide in the mothers because the

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[1] Atwood, *Second Words*, p. 349.

mothers are incapable of understanding modern day social predicaments. In *Surfacing,* for example, the daughter feels threatened by the mother's innocence. And Rennie, in *Bodily Harm,* has stopped telling her mother anything of any importance and conceals even the breast cancer from her. In *The Handmaid's Tale,* although the relationship is more conciliatory between the protagonist and her mother, it is still difficult. Like many gothic heroines, Atwood's protagonists have literally lost their mothers but they have also rejected or re-invented the past in their bid for independence and self-determination. In a sense, they become voluntary exiles: which is linked to the denial of coming from 'no where'. Like the classical Persephone, Atwood's fictional heroines, must descend into the underworld to find their lost mothers.[2] Unfortunately, coming to terms with the past is a one-sided restoration of family ties and not a real reconciliation since the mothers are all dead. The psychological journeys undertaken by Atwood's heroines reveal the daughters' efforts to incorporate the past by recognising their complicity in what they see as rather unhappy relationships with their mothers.

Another aspect of 'mothering' is the image of the female Frankenstein and the creation of monsters. The 'hideous progeny' in *Surfacing* is an aborted foetus which haunts the narrator; Joan Foster is the monstrous creation foisted unwittingly upon her mother; and in *The Handmaid's Tale,* defective babies are referred to as 'shredders' and disposed of. In the novels, there is the suggestion that the mothers view their daughters as monstrous and therefore reject them. While this might be overstating the point somewhat, the mothers' inability to understand the daughters results in a debilitating isolation

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[2] Sherrill E. Grace also discusses the Persephone reverberations in Margaret Atwood's work. See 'In Search of Demeter: The Lost, Silent Mother in *Surfacing*,' in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms,* ed. K. VanSpanckeren and J. G. Castro (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois Unviersity Press, 1988) pp. 35-47.

and fragmentation. The rejection is most pronounced in *Lady Oracle,* but is present in the other novels.

By focussing on the loneliness and isolation of women in contemporary society, Atwood suggests that it is the lack of sustaining female companionship which creates situations of dreadful uncertainty for the heroines. In *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood shows the strength of friendship between women and how such relationships can sustain one's sanity. In fact, it is because of female friendship that Offred never experiences the same debilitating fragmentation and dehumanisation of Atwood's other heroines. And as a consequence, *The Handmaid's Tale* remains the most positive of the four novels.

Atwood's fiction also illustrates the complex and wide-ranging pattern of victimisation. Atwood takes us through the transformations of her own society and provides a new interpretation of the concept of victimisation. There is a transformation from the psychological victimisation of the individual in *Surfacing* to the more literal victimisation of a society in *The Handmaid's Tale.* Victimisation in this novel is a concern seen not just from a single perspective, but from a much broader social perspective. There is a transformation to encompass the realisation that we live in an increasingly violent and power-oriented society. While this might seem a somewhat depressing revelation, Atwood's discussion of the complexities of victimisation offers hope for the future.

One aspect of victimisation is emotional detachment. Detachment (being on the edge of things) seems to be associated in Atwood's novels with a lack of personal, social and moral responsibility because of the links she makes between detachment and destructiveness. As a means of protecting

themselves, Atwood's heroines remove themselves not only from past attachments, which they see as threatening, but also from present attachments, as well. They seek relationships in which an emotional commitment can be avoided. Like the malevolent, life-denying, cold women described in *Survival,* Atwood's heroines are cut off from the past and subjected to the same processes of victimisation that the country as a whole is forced to endure culturally. But implicit in Atwood's argument is the idea that victims must refute the illusion of their own innocence and recognise their complicity in the destructive cycle of power and victimisation. In the process of discovering their own guilt, Atwood's heroines gain a new strength.

Even Atwood's use of the various gothic settings, including the Canadian wilderness, emphasises the emotional detachment suffered by the heroines. The cold lonely, detached heroines seem to prove Atwood's own thesis about Venus not being necessarily absent in Canadian literature, but concealed.[3] The journey undertaken by the heroines is from detachment on the edge (in the 'social wilderness') to commitment at the centre — figuratively and, sometimes, literally speaking. The Canadian wilderness, on the border of the civilised world, reflects the heroines who see themselves as out in the cold, invisible, spectators, rather than participants in life and most importantly as victims, not just victims of other people but of society as a whole.

In the traditional Gothic too much feeling was associated with distorted vision. Atwood shows that detachment can produce an equally distorted view. In her inversion of the gothic form she makes commitment an important qualification for being able to see the truth of the situation or of

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[3] Atwood, *Survival,* p. 211.

oneself. The idea of 'bearing witness' is connected with telling the truth instead of 'fictionalising' to suit the protagonist's version of the truth. 'Bearing witness' can be an individual responsibility exemplified by the destruction of the heron in *Surfacing* or a collective responsibility exemplified by the destruction of all civil liberties in *The Handmaid's Tale.*

One interesting question which must be asked is whether Atwood's heroines with their cauterised emotions and inability to act are mad or going mad. It is a gothic convention for the mad heroine to be passionate and madness is sometimes manifested as an excess of passion. Atwood has in fact done the opposite — she signals madness by using the nightmare and 'in limbo' motifs, yet her heroines are dispassionate. Does Atwood, in fact, create a modern gothic situation where madness equals lack of feeling? While I do not want to suggest that Atwood's heroines are mad, there is a potential for madness in all of them as a logical consequence of their detachment. The annihilation of the self which Atwood's heroines falsely believe will protect them, exposes them to the dangers of insanity. In other words, the dispassionate heroines create for themselves a milieu every bit as threatening as the gothic madhouse.

Atwood's heroines exemplify aspects of her perception of Canada. On the one hand they demonstrate a kinship with the bleak and isolated landscape in their cold, lonely and emotionally crippled personalities. But they also reflect in their toughness and independence the very idea of survival.

> Beyond truth,
> tenacity: of those
> dwarf trees & mosses,
> hooked into straight rock
> believing the sun's lies & thus
> refuting / gravity
>
> & of this cactus, gathering
> itself together

against the sand, yes tough
rind & spikes but doing
the best it can [4]

Tenacity is one of the enduring characteristics of Atwood's heroines. In this aspect of her heroines, Atwood is continuing the idea present in the gothic novels of Mrs Radcliffe of the heroine who manages to endure the hardships inflicted on her. Atwood, however, transforms the resilient heroine into a subversive who is capable of not only sustaining but also surviving all that is thrust upon her. However, the transformation from resilient heroine to subversive is not necessarily depicted by Atwood as an heroic struggle since the heroines themselves remain very ordinary women.

An important development in Atwood's later fiction is her literalising of gothic fears. The concretisation of fears and anxieties surrounding the female experience that we see in *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale,* produces a confrontation with evil of such magnitude that all pretense of innocence disappears. In these two novels, the harrowing scenes of female victimisation are so graphically depicted that escape into disbelief is impossible On the verge of destruction, the heroines are forced into a reassessment of their positions. The process of reassessment and the ensuing self-rescue are important features of Atwood's reconstruction of the female gothic sensibility. While the endings remain somewhat ambiguous, this display of self-rescuing heroinism is more acceptable to contemporary feminist thinking than the more traditional gothic rescue by the romantic hero.

The lack of resolution at the conclusion of each novel is a major inversion of the gothic form. The narrator of *Surfacing* returns to the city and the same conditions which almost brought her to the point of self-

[4] Atwood, 'Beyond Truth', from *Power Politics,* in *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 160.

destruction in the first place; in *Bodily Harm* we are not sure that Rennie ever escapes the island prison, and Joan Foster seems to be about to embark on a journey into the fantasy realm of science fiction. Apart from *The Handmaid's Tale,* there is nothing really optimistic about the endings of Atwood's novels. The process by which the heroines move from their marginality to a position of commitment appears to be a continuous one, which is possibly why Atwood prefers the open-endedness of the conclusions. The ambiguous endings suggest that there is no definitive story, but a multitude of alternatives.

David Punter's reference to gothic fiction as 'paranoiac fiction' is relevant to Atwood because she does not allow the reader to remain a passive observer.[5] First of all, we are involved in deciphering the mystery by piecing together the story. The mystery is compounded by the questionable reliability of Atwood's narrator. When the reader becomes involved in the doubts and uncertainties which permeate the narrative, there is an alignment of reader sympathy. The story is no longer 'just' a story. By establishing a relationship between the narrator and the reader, Atwood makes the story both a voyage of discovery and a kind of self-confrontation.

Although Atwood utilises many of the narrative strategies favored by gothic writers of the past, it is with a strong sense of irony. She transforms the Gothic so that the gothic horrors are presented, not as fantasies, but as the realities of everyday experiences when viewed from within. In this sense, Atwood's fiction celebrates disunity and sets up a dialogue with tradition.[6]

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[5] Punter, *The Literature of Terror,* p. 404.

[6] This corresponds with Linda Hutcheon's discussion on the postmodern aspects of Margaret Atwood's fiction in 'Process, Product, and Politics: The Postmodernism of Margaret Atwood', *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction.* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 138-59.

Atwood epitomises the modern writer's desire to make things visible, and to provide an alternative ending to a traditional story. But the desire to make things visible sets up a conflict with the sense of decorum, invisibility being the 'respectable' stance for a woman. Atwood's revision of the gothic sensibility suggests a resistance to the traditional patterns of feminine behaviour and an appeal for a more liberating and authentic female experience which incorporates physical and emotional responsibility for oneself.

There is a connection between women's desire to tell their stories and the desire to tell Canadian stories. Women writers represent the invisibility that was once the problem of Canadian literature and the desire for Canadian writers to find a 'new voice' while maintaining its differences. Canada sees itself as invisible and marginalised because of the tremendous influence exerted by the United States. In a curious sense, just as Atwood's stories represent an imaginative rehabilitation of the feminine as an alternative source of power, Canada represents the feminine confrontation with the more aggressively masculine United States. Atwood's heroines share a symbolic identity with Canada in their victimisation and initial powerlessness but they also affirm selfhood and power within the context of the Canadian literary tradition.

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